EQUITY-FOCUSED LEADERSHIP: THE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND BELIEFS OF
PRINCIPALS IN ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS SERVING STUDENTS
FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The American schooling system is built on a history of inequity where some students have been, and continue to be, denied access to opportunity structure based on discriminatory policies, practices, structures, and systems. This lack of equitable access and educational experiences have led to inequitable outcomes, which persist despite efforts over the past 30 years to repay the educational debt and narrow the achievement gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Tatum, 2003, 2019). In recent years, scholarship has identified characteristics and practices of equity-focused leaders who are leading schools that are closing the achievement gaps and by deconstructing inequitable structures and replacing them with those focused on equity.

Upon a review of the student achievement data from a state in the southeastern United States, of the nearly 1200 secondary schools, one only finds thirteen schools where students of color from marginalized communities have academic outcomes beyond the average. This study is a phenomenological examination of six of the principals leading these schools. The phenomenological approach is appropriate in this case because it allows the participants to share their life-worlds within the context of their own positionality, context, and life experiences. This study seeks to understand the following research questions:

1. How do principals define the leadership practices they utilize to build systems that result in more equitable outcomes?

2. What are key commonalities of practice and shared traits among the principals of these schools?

Based on semi-structured interviews and a hermeneutic process for explication of the data, I utilized situated narratives to identify the day-to-day practices and beliefs of equity-focused leaders. These leaders have an early exposure and develop a critical understanding of

the issues related to equity, establish a clear vision for equity and instructional excellence in their schools, hire and support teachers based on this vision, build strong relationships and hold high expectations for all stakeholders based on a love ethic, are critically reflective, and make autonomous decisions based a strong moral center. I also found clear interactions with race and gender in the realms of leadership practices and interaction with the schooling systems. Further, I was able to make qualitative connections between standardized student achievement data and equity-focused practices.

The implications of this work lie in the education, preparation, selection, and professional development of equity-focused leaders that use transformational approaches to deconstruct inequitable structures and replace them with schooling systems that allow all students access to the opportunity structure.

Acknowledgements

The three years I've spent in the doctoral program at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign have been life altering. I have spent my career working toward a more just world, teaching subversively to illuminate issues of injustice for my students, helping them develop a worldview to understand the positionalities of the people in their world and in the world, and empowering them to change those worlds. In my transition to school leadership in 2016, I took these ideals from my classroom and worked to embed them in a school culture based on love, rigor, and understanding. My time in this program has helped me develop the language to truly be an equity-focused leader who empowers and supports adults in their quest to make children's lives better.

I am eternally thankful for my wife, Chrissy Oliver Williams, who, in addition to teaching her own students each day, took care of our children at night so I could attend class, read, and write. She also keeps me in line when I begin to think I'm something special. I am a blessed human to be able to share my life with some who is as passionate about making the world a better place as I am.

I am grateful for my parents who chose to raise me in an environment where I learned to recognize inequity, treat people with love and respect, and value the capital all human beings bring.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research is personal. Some 22 years ago, I started my journey as an educator with

the sole intent of making the world better for as many people as I could. I am the product of an

upper middle class family. Yet, my parents put me in a position to recognize the world I grew up

in differed from that of many of my peers. Then, between the time I started middle school and

the time I graduated high school, seven of my friends were murdered. This pointed me toward a

pathway to try to make the world more just.

After 12 years as a classroom teacher, where I built my work around teaching for social

justice, I made a very difficult decision to step out of the classroom and into the role of school

administrator. For the past six years I have been the principal of a school that serves students

from marginalized communities. My drive to promote social justice and lead for equity has

never wavered, and I proudly lead one of 13 schools in our state where students of color who live

in socioeconomic poverty are experiencing academic success.

There are no easy answers to the disprortionate educational outcomes caused by what

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) terms the social and educational debt owed to students of color in

this country. But, through hard work, intense focus, intentional collaboration, purposeful

instruction, and appropriate supports, the school where I work has improved outcomes to better

ensure every child has access to the opportunity structure through equitable experiences.

Over the past three years, I have begun to consider the common characteristics of schools

that are making headway with students from marginalized communities. In digging through the

public data from the Southeastern state where I live, I quickly discovered student achievement

measures that move beyond just the average are rare. As noted earlier, only 13 of the nearly

1,200 secondary schools in the state with more than 50 percent of students qualifying for

free/reduced lunch and more than 50 percent of students of color are designated as exceeding

expected growth and proficiency. Quite naturally, a desire to know what these schools have in

common has piqued my interest.

The impact of an effective principal is profound. Recently, Grissom, Egalite, and

Lindsey (2021), writing for the Wallace Foundation, released a study examining the impact of an

effective principal on student learning, noting it is difficult to envision a higher return on

investment than the cultivation of high-quality school leadership. Their evaluation of the

synthesis of research found a principal in the 75th percentile of effectiveness yields an increase

in student learning in reading and math of about three months across an entire school, and those

leaders who develop an equity lens can significantly improve a school's ability to meet the needs

of students from marginalized backgrounds.

In looking across the state and nation, much could be learned from the narratives of these

highly effective principals. Further, while research exists that highlights practices that promote

student learning and achievement, we have to remember the cleanliness of theory should never

chip away at the messiness of reality. My research is grounded in exploring that daily reality of

the tough work it takes for all students to have the opportunity for success.

In this study, I will share the voices of the school leaders of schools where student

achievement outpaces the norm to explore their positionality, their practices, and their belief

systems. Their narratives can give us insight into the day-to-day work required to transform a

school and improve the experience and outcomes for all students, especially those students who

need scaffolding to reach the opportunity structure. This study will explore the research that

exists - as these leaders certainly exhibit what is captured in the theories - but will provide

greater insight into the difficult task of moving the equity needle while managing a complex organization.

The Problem and Purpose

The important research focused on equity has often been translated into fly-by-night, one-shot professional development programs that do little to alter the structural deficiencies implicit in our schools. Further, while Douglass-Horsford and Clark (2015), for example, utilize a series of case studies to highlight principals and superintendents who take an anti-racist approach, a research gap exists regarding the day-to-day leadership practices of principals who do this work well.

This study entails a phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of principals in a state in the southeastern region of the United States who lead schools with students from marginalized communities achieving high academic performance on the state's End of Grade tests. This study has merit for three reasons: (1) it will examine the gap between the research foundations and the active practices of school leaders; (2) it will highlight the themes related to leadership rising from schools with perceived success; and (3) it will explore the belief systems, personal histories, and characteristics of the leaders who do this work well.

Because interviews provide deeper insights into the intricate work of these principals, a phenomenological investigation is best suited to explore the specific practices used and challenges faced by school leaders. Understanding the lived experiences of these principals can assist in helping both colleges of education and school districts create stronger systems for candidate selection, preparation, professional development, and support by offering a clear understanding of the narrative. By illuminating specific practices in the day-to-day work, this study will add rich information to improve schools nationally.

This study will, therefore, address the following research questions:

1. How do principals define the leadership practices they utilize to build systems that result in more equitable outcomes?

2. What are key commonalities of practice and shared traits among the principals of these schools?

Theoretical Framework

While a phenomenological approach serves as the theoretical basis for data collection and interpretation, it is important to note that no grand theory exists in the realm of school leadership. Rather, scholars in this field utilize the larger theoretical foundations of the social sciences, along with the concept of transformational leadership, to examine the system of whiteness present in schooling and the educational processes.

Further, by taking a phenomenological approach, I aim to identify the practices and beliefs systems that drive equity-focused leadership using what Van der Mescht (2004) describes as a "'what it's like for them' type of study" that is appropriate and significant in the realm of educational leadership because of the potentially powerful process "of making sense of education practitioners' sense-making, and can lead to new insights into the uniquely complex processes of learning, teaching, and educational managing and leading" (p. 1). It will allow for the incorporation of the participants' conceptions of cultural and historical contexts as a part of their work in designing equitable systems.

Defining Equity-focused Leadership

The definition of equity-focused leadership has evolved over the past thiry years, beginning with the work of James Banks and Gloria Ladson-Billings centered on multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy, respectively. By 2010, a small, but growing, body of research centered on social justice had developed. In the decade since, that body of research has expanded rapidly, pulling in concepts such as culturally responsive leadership,

leadership for anti-racism, and leadership for equity. I discuss this evolution in detail in the literature review.

For the purpose of this study, I will utilize the term equity-focused leadership, and base this definition primarily on the work of Scheurich and colleagues, who identified several characteristics of leaders focused on equity (Scheurich, 2020; Scheurich, 1998; Scheurich & Liable, 1995; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; McKenzie, et al, 2008). These characterisics, about which I write extensively in the literature review, are: (1) leaders are dedicated to a strong common vision of equity; (2) leaders are aggressively student centered; (3) leaders build structures that balance community and academic rigor; and (4) leaders are deeply reflective and aware of the historical roots of inequity. This decision is not intended to marginalize other researchers or strands of research, but rather seeks to include them in Scheurich's more global definition of leadership. To this end, the concepts of anti-racism and culturally responsive pedagogy are implicit in the definition and are present in schools with equitable practices and outcomes.

Specifically, equity-focused leadership is defined by a set of core values. First, equity focused leaders are dedicated to the principle that all children can succeed. Second, equity-focused leaders are aggressively student centered. Third, equity-focused leaders build school culture based on a love ethic, in which students and staff feel both supported and challenged. Finally, equity-focused leaders are deeply reflective and root their work in some form of critical theory, even if they are not aware they do so.

Ultimately, I am defining equity-focused leadership as situations where principals implement these values in a school setting to deconstruct systems that deny access to high quality learning experiences to students from marginalized backgrounds, limit some students to substandard instructional practices, and consequently damn students to poorer outcomes than

their non-marginalized peers. These principals then seek to recreate systems that allow for equitable access, equitable experiences, and ultimately equitable outcomes that enable students to reach the opportunity structure without having to sacrifice their own social and cultural capital.

Key Terms

In this section, I will define the key terms that arise related to the theoretical frameworks and the literature. I will explore these terms in more depth in the literature review.

Equity

Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer, and Roc (2016) define equity as "the policies and practices that provide every student access to an education focused on meaningful learning—one that teaches the deeper learning skills contemporary society requires in ways that empower students to learn independently throughout their lives" (p. 1). More generally, equity is a state in which resources are allocated in proportion to need and context. Equity is not the same as equality, the state in which resources are allocated equally, no matter the context or situation.

Social Justice

Social justice is based on the concept of fairness. It describes a state where all stakeholders have equitable access to the opportunity structure, including the resources it takes to level the playing field. This includes the basic right to political, social, economic, and educational resources (Bankston, 2010). Ultimately, social justice challenges the norms that allow one group of people to hold dominance over others.

Oppression

Oppression is the exercise of control by one group of people over another exploited group. This exercise of power may include physical dominance, as well as emotional, cultural, social, educational, and other institutional measures (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Transformational leadership practices

Leaders who exercise transformational leadership practices work to create a culture focused on a common vision rooted in a moral cause. They set goals for ethical and moral improvement and incentivize success.

Assumptions

In this research, I make a significant assumption that schools with strong outcomes for students of color and/or those who qualify for subsidized meals on standardized tests are led by equity-focused leaders. In considering this definition of success, as a nation, we often immediately revert to students' success on standardized tests. This is problematic, as a review of the literature clearly indicates these types of tests are racially biased (Akom, 2004; Banks, 2000; Barro, 2001; Chang, 2003; Espinoza, 1993; Gamoran, 2001; Guinier, 2015; Haney & Hurtado, 1994; Helms, 2002; Horn, 2005; Issacharoff, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Linn, 2001; Linn, 1982; Marlaire & Maynard, 1990; Rizga, 2015; Selmi, 1994; Sólorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Suzuki & Aronson, 2005; Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006). The entire standardized testing movement, for example, is rooted in the pseudo-science of eugenicists in the early 20th century designed to support and extend racial segregation, among others. These early tests were developed into the SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement examinations that serve as the basis for states' standardized testing models (Lemann, 1999; Roasles & Walker, 2021). By the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, states and districts colleges and universities were basing acceptance on obviously biased standardized tests, leading to a situation where "the machinery…is today so familiar and all-encompassing that it seems almost like a natural phenomenon, or at least an organism that evolved spontaneously in response to conditions" (Lemann, 1999, p. 6). Presently,

while most test creators screen test items for obvious bias, the tests continue to have underlying bias in the format or content.

Nevertheless, because the American educational system - from grade school promotion to college acceptance - is built primarily on this system of testing, it is a key data point that must be considered. To this end, while I certainly do not believe schools that do not meet the cut scores are necessarily failing, I do think there is value in considering the characteristics of schools that do. Consequently, I am working under the assumption that leaders of schools, with sizable racial minority students who are score well on standardized tests, are leading for equity.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature begins with a brief overview of inequity as it relates to the American schooling system. Then, I review the research on instructional leadership as a means toward equity and the structures of oppression that doomed that approach. Next, I trace the practices and characteristics of leadership centered on equity and social justice, and the characteristics of schools focused on equity. Finally, I connect the practices to the transformational power of principals to affect positive change on student outcomes.

Historical Inequity

America's schools are plagued by disproportionate access and outcomes for students of color and marginalized backgrounds, which has been coined an *achievement gap*. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), however, frames the discussion about the achievement gap with an exclamation that it is not a gap at all; instead, it's a historical debt, where America failed to effectively educate students from marginalized backgrounds for hundreds of years. Most students of color face a situation in schools where access to the starting line and the subsequent opportunity structure is not equitable. We find this in the realms of academic achievement (Tatum, 2000; 2019), interaction with school discipline systems (Skiba, et al, 2002), and access to honors level courses (Corra, et al, 2011). Further, students of color struggle to see themselves in the designed curriculum (Tatum, 2003).

Moore and Bell (2010) argue the many attempts at building equitable structures over the past 30 years end up "covertly protecting white privilege, power, and wealth by divorcing these concepts from the structural realities of racial inequality" (p. 124). Even as school leaders began including racially minoritized persons in formats and settings where they have been underrepresented for many years, they maintained the sense that whiteness is desirabilized by

perpetuating white ownership of these spaces even as small groups of students of color are admitted (Radd & Grosland, 2019). This practice of admittance was true in the years following the *Brown* decision and remains true as students of color seek to gain access to the elite educational structures in this country. Ultimately, systemic oppressions are "a defining characteristic of American society" (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520), and are embedded in the structures of the education system (Roegman, 2017).

Much research over the past 30 years has been done to address the systemic inequities implicit in schooling. Banks' (1995) work to integrate multicultural perspectives into the written and taught curriculum sparked research leading to a wider representation of students' stories and the development of teaching for social justice, Ferguson (2001) and Skiba (2002) highlighted the deep biases in school discipline systems, Noguera (2003; 2003) extensively outlined the impact of social structures on student success, and Lareau (2011) analyzed the impact of social class on outcomes in school and life. In the past two decades, a collection of research in the schools where the historical debt is being repaid and the achievement gap is narrowing has uncovered, defined, and evaluated the leadership practices that lead to more equitable access, experience, and outcomes.

Improvement through Instructional Leadership

The initial attempts at building more equitable structures were focused on the transition of the principal from a manager to an instructional leader, with the supposition this focus would result in improved instructional practices and more positive student outcomes (Halverson, et al, 2007). Hallinger (2011) argued leadership for learning has the greatest impact on student learning and achievement, and implicit to this argument is the inclusion of transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and culture in the work of leading for learning. He believed this shift in leadership brings improvement in the other realms of schooling.

Hallinger's (2003) work puts a focus on the leader as the primary catalyst for improvement. To this end, when the leader sets specific instructional goals and outcomes and clearly communicates them to the organization, she or he creates a sense of ownership for a new vision and a need for the structures that support this vision. Further, by incentivizing stakeholders, the leader creates a culture of improvement (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Transformational leadership also plays a significant role in school improvement. The tenets of transformational leadership call for the leader to create collegial relationships between leadership and stakeholders to create a common vision and mission, set goals, develop plans, and evaluate progress (Northouse, 2007). A key component of these collegial interactions is a sense of morality, in which all stakeholders recognize the importance of continual improvement on those affected by the outcomes (Printy, Marks & Bowers, 2009). Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, (2008) found the most significant impact on student achievement is the principal's focus on instruction and pedagogical improvement. Further, while transformational leadership helps create a culture focused on improving student achievement, the utilization of practices that pointed at instructional improvement are the disruptive force that actually improves student outcomes (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Supovitz, Sirinides & May, 2010).

Ultimately, the utilization of both practices in schools has an impact on student outcomes. Principals who are adept with both skillsets have the ability to inspire stakeholders toward a common goal of improvement through mutual trust and shared purpose, and they build their school culture around this trust and purpose (Hallinger, 2011; Printy, et al, 2009). By building this common vision, creating the appropriate structures, and empowering leadership within the organization, principals can transform their organizations.

While this focus on instructional leadership practices does lead to improvements in student achievement, the academic gaps continue to exist. In the preparation of school

administrators for this work, school districts began looking for solutions that did not consider the different positionalities of students and families, and how these different social experiences and capital affected their ability to successfully navigate the schooling structures. Ultimately, this focus on closing the achievement gap with instructional solutions results in a missed target of the larger problem: the structures of oppression implicit in schools. To this end, simply providing access to students is only a first step in achieving equity, and despite much work by both scholars and practitioners over the past 30 years, many students still sit outside of the proverbial gate. Schools continue to fall into destructive patterns where students of color perform markedly lower than their white peers (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004), and students' outcomes correspond very closely to race, class, and gender inequalities in our society (Scheurich & Liable, 1995).

Leadership Foundations

In building equity and deconstructing oppressive structures, school leaders must consider three very important components: (1) equity in access, (2) equity in experience; and (3) equity in outcomes. The work of integrating the research and practice over the past 30 years to bring this transformation falls on school leaders.

School leadership is one of the two most crucial components to any reform, second only to the very act of teaching (Leithwood, et al, 1998), and "exemplary leadership [creates] the necessity for change" (Theoharis, 2009, p. 8). Since 2000, the role of the principal has changed drastically, transitioning from a managerial role to that of an instructional and cultural leader. With this change, over the first decade of the 21st century, a small body of research centered on social justice and equity emerged (Theoharis, 2009). Because of an enhanced emphasis on subgroup performance, that body of equity-focused and culturally responsive leadership research has grown substantially in the decade since, offering insight into how leaders leverage student, family, and cultural assets to create conditions in which students are liberated through education

(Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). A profile of the effective equity-focused leader, who works to intentionally disrupt racism, languagism, religionism, ableism, sexism, classism, nativism, and other marginalizing forces in schools, has emerged to serve as a model for both principal preparation and practice in America (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Theoharis, 2007).

Systems of Oppression

Oppression is the exercise of power by a dominant group upon an exploited or minoritized group, and oppression occurs when one group of people use historical, social, and institutional structures of power to justify their dominance over another group of people (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). A key component of oppression is the *othering* of people who do not fit the traditional societal norm and argues people in the marginalized groups experience oppression physically, verbally, psychologically, and through stereotyping (Kumashiro, 2000). The more powerful group utilizes symbolic violence to legitimize their beliefs, systems, and culture as the norm.

In many cases, the oppressive structures become so embedded in a culture, the members of all groups begin to play the hierarchical role they are assigned (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). This leads to structures that do not require members of the dominant group to understand all perspectives in order to enjoy a sense of comfort, and forces members of the marginalized groups to adapt their positionality and actions to mediate the societal norms and structures imposed upon them.

Schools are a clear example of the broader systems of oppression in the United States. Herr and Anderson's (2003) study identified two examples in a middle school where white middle-class teachers imposed their ideologies on students, leading to the need for students to

adapt their behavior to fit the cultural expectations of the teachers in order to be successful. These types of actions, which are prevalent in schools across the country, lead to the marginalization of students and their cultural capital, in which people who identify with the non-dominant culture become separated from the dominant culture (Rudmin, 2004).

Systemic Racism and Anti-Racism

Quite often, people (particularly white people) define racism through a lens where individual people commit racist acts. Racism, in actuality, is a system of privilege and advantages based on race including "cultural messages and institutional policies and practices *as well as* the beliefs and actions of individuals" (Tatum, 2003, p. 7). This conception of institutional racism requires a more complex, multi-layered understanding that racism is "faceless at times within structures, but paradoxically experienced and perpetuated by individuals within organizations and institutions" in which privileges "benefit white people but are often invisible to them" (p. 3). Critical race theorists further believe systemic racism is ingrained in American culture and society (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2013) and argue educators must work under the assumption systemic institutional racism is pervasive in schools (Pollock, 2008; Gooden & Dantley, 2012). School leaders, therefore, must become critically conscious of systemic racism. Quite often, white administrators and teachers fail to recognize their role in perpetuating racist systems and processes because they do not see themselves or their colleagues as individually racist. In making this assumption, they neglect to consider their place in a racist system rooted in white supremacy.

Anti-racism, then, is a conscious and deliberate effort to "challenge the impact and perpetuation of institutional white racial power, presence, and privilege…[to ensure] life liberty and the pursuit of happiness are guaranteed to people of color as well as white people"

(Singleton & Linton, 2006, pp. 45-46). Everyday anti-racism takes into consideration the ways individuals combat racism in their lived contexts (Aquino, 2016; Pollock, 2008) and is defined by Young and Liable (2000) through three primary characteristics: (1) a focus on white racial dominance; (2) understanding how racism works throughout our society; and (3) taking action against white racism. In the context of schooling, while individual anti-racism is important, Welton, Owens, and Zamani-Gallagher (2018) argue educational institutions must take the next step of institutional and systemic change. Solomon (2002) defines this transformation through specific characteristics institutions should possess: the development of an anti-racist environment for all stakeholders; the cultivation of a school-wide anti-racism campaign; the recruitment of a diverse faculty; the encouragement of participation from all stakeholders; and bolstering relationships with organizations that have an equity focus. To this end, anti-racism requires action, not just thought: consciousness without action only contributes to the continuance of racist systems and ideologies (Tatum, 1992; Wellman, 1993). Welton, Owens, and Zamani Gallagher (2018) argue often "that systemic level and anti-racist change never actually happens [because] scholars and educator are bogged down with the individual commitment and in turn neglect the larger institution" (p. 6). They believe there must be commitment from both the individuals and the institution for anti-racist practices to truly be effective. Ultimately, there is no grey area in anti-racism. One must be actively working against racism or be complicit, as "there are no bystanders or neutral observers" (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997, p. 24).

Anti-racist Leadership as a Means toward Equity

In their advocacy for action, Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) argue the metamorphosis toward anti-racist thinking and action cycles through four stages: (1) conflict; (2) disequilibrium; (3) transformation; and (4) activism. In short, initially, folks take a combative

stance and frame their thinking around individual racism. New knowledge leads to a sense of confusion and angst, which necessitate transformation. Ultimately, individuals become activists, although Sheurich (2020) reminds us one is never really *woke*, because white people can never fully grasp the impact of race on people of color and must consciously continue to try to understand, lest they revert back to a state of white supremacy. Educators must focus on the system of white dominance, understand how individuals and institutions promote and perpetuate this system, and commit to prepare stakeholders to act against the systemic structures (Young & Laible, 2000).

At a school level, equity-focused leaders must move faculty and staff through the process of becoming more anti-racist (Salisbury, et al, 2019). Gooden, et al (2018) assert faculty and staff will become more aware by gaining and integrating new knowledge about race and injustice, conducting an internal examination, (re)envisioning the world, and ultimately take anti-racist actions. The act of listening to and for counternarratives is implicit in this design, as participants must become adept at critically and consciously listening. Further, this very difficult work in schools must include the support of teams of teachers in their self-reflection about their positionality, purposefully helping teachers gain new knowledge, building teachers' toolbox of culturally reflective instructional practices, and offering continuous opportunities for professional development (Salisbury, et al, 2019). And, as Scheurich (2020) proclaims, this work of becoming more anti-racist is an eternal process.

Equity and Social Justice in Schools

As leaders become more equity focused, they develop their sense of social justice and begin taking action toward anti-racism. Bruno (2008) defines social justice in the broadest sense to include:

Political, educational, legal, economic, social, and other human rights of people. Social

justice symbolizes the concept of fairness and advocates that no one be discriminated

against on the grounds of religion, belief, gender, color, class, wealth, or social class (p.

483).

Dantley and Tillman (2010) extend this definition by defining the conditions by which resources

are redistributed to level the playing field. They also argue the initial stages of social justice

begin with the recognition of injustice and the realization that oppression is the main source of

injustice. This redistribution of resources is significant in the educational realm because the

initial steps of an equity-focused leader include ensuring equitable access for all students. For

schools, access must move beyond finances and material goods to include equity in decisions

about teaching assignments, curriculum, and access to higher level courses and instruction

(Barbara & Krovets, 2005).

To alter the course of inequity, school leaders must rethink the expectations they hold for

students and teachers, reconsider the ways their schools are organized, reconceptualize the

curricula and instructional practices, and generally reconstruct policy that excludes some

students while offering property ownership to others (McKenzie & Scheruich, 2004). Scheurich

(1998) captures these core beliefs in his statement that effective equity-focused leadership

practices will result in an equity-focused school with seven organizational cultural

characteristics: (1) the school has a strong shared vision; (2) the school is a loving, caring

environment for children and adults; (3) the school is built on the concept of family; (4) the

school is innovative and open to new ideas; (5) the staff is hardworking, but careful not to burn

out; (6) appropriate conduct for all stakeholders is built into the culture; and (7) all staff hold

themselves accountable for the success of all children.

McKenzie and Locke (2010) substantiate Scheurich's argument by defining a set of central beliefs promoted in equity-focused schools. First is the belief that all students can achieve high levels of academic success regardless of their positionality. Second, all adults in the school take responsibility for both equity-consciousness and student learning. Third, equity-focused schools are willing to recognize traditional practices are appropriate for some students, but are willing to adapt practices, systems, and structures to meet the needs of students who need a more innovative approach.

A leader's ability to ingrain these beliefs and practices in an organization is essential to gaining building-wide traction toward equity (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Salisbury, 2019) and will ultimately result in heterogeneous, inclusive classrooms and spaces, leading to both the cultivation of critical consciousness in all students and result in increased academic achievement (McKenzie, et al, 2008).

Core Values of Equity-Focused Leaders

Certainly, not all school leaders have experienced a personal transformation that allows them to lead an equity-focused movement. The equity-focused leaders who are successful in this work, however, have some common beliefs and practices.

Dedication to a Strong Common Vision

These leaders are dedicated to a strong common vision that all children can succeed with no exceptions allowed (Scheurich, 1998; Theoharis, 2009; Gooden & Dantley, 2012). They lead through reflective practices that encourage the investigation and analysis of issues of inequality and promptly address barriers (Byrk, et al, 2009). This vision is driven by an equity attitude that focuses stakeholders and helps them move "beyond simplistic solutions to focus on destroying inequitable systems of curriculum, pedagogy, and organization" (Radd & Grosland, 2019, p.

658). Gooden and Dantley (2012) go so far as to identify the vision and message as an unwavering, prophetic demand for revolutionary change in the policies and practices that lead to shameful discriminatory results.

Aggressively Student Centered

Equity-focused school leaders are aggressively student-centered and constantly ask questions that ensure decisions are driven by a higher purpose and are in the best interest of all students at all times. They hold an "open and even aggressive willingness to alter any aspect of schooling for the purpose of achieving the goal of student success" (Scheurich, 1998, p. 462). This focus creates a move away from the normalization of the white ownership of success and often goes against the bureaucratic nature of schools (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Galea, 2012). Instead, equity-focused leaders invite criticism of the "illegitimate forms of exclusion [that] provide the bedrock" for white supremacy and identify the barriers that keep students from learning to promptly deconstruct them with little concern for tradition or the norm (Lomotely, 1995, p. 297).

A Balance of Love and Rigor

Equity-focused leaders build schools with cultures centered on a balance of love and academic rigor, and recognize children learn little in classrooms where this balance is not present. This practice of love as an ethic is conceptualized as connectedness, solidarity, and common affiliation, and is deeply cognizant of an appreciation of the social and historical context and positionality of the children sitting in the seats (Scheurich, 1998). Successful schools move beyond being tolerant of children's context; rather, their social and cultural capital is valued, praised, and utilized to drive student learning (Salisbury, 2020). To that end, the love ethic is balanced with academic rigor to support all children (McKenzie, et al, 2008). Principals

who successfully build equitable structures and outcomes are instructional leaders who can identify, prompt, coach, and guide teachers toward both the instructional and reflective practices that support the individualized learning of all students, regardless of positionality (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Blase & Blase, 1998; Leithwood & Duke, 1998). These leaders know that when faculty are reflective about the impact of privilege on learning practices and implement instruction that is culturally relevant, they create the conditions students from marginalized backgrounds need to be successful (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Deeply Reflective and aware of the Historical Roots of Inequity

Finally, equity-based leaders, based on their own positionality and the context of their school community, establish roots in deep reflective practices and an awareness of the tenets of critical race theory (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). This theoretical foundation serves as the lens through which criticism of policies and structures can be filtered, creating a culture of both critical thought and criticism of the work of the school. Strong equity-focused leaders know if educators hold biases that students from certain backgrounds are less likely to achieve, this creates "dysconscious, an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity" (King, 1997, p. 135). Through the employment of a critical approach, leaders become more critically conscious of both their own personal positions on racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, religion, age, and disability, and they cultivate critical consciousness among their faculty and staff (McKenzie, et al, 2008). Equity-focused leaders are ultimately grounded in some form of Friere's (2001) approach to freedom: schools exist for a purpose larger than getting students to pass a test, although this may be an important measure to satisfy the power structure. Rather, the purpose of school is to countermand social reproduction and prepare students for their lives. Schools that

successfully educate students from historically marginalized backgrounds always have this underlying critical foundation (Scheurich, 1998).

Welton, Owens, and Zamani-Gallagher (2018) capture the essense of these characteristics in their framework for institutional change. Their framework is rooted in the principles of anti-racism and organizational change, including the power of leadership, to allow institutions to outline specific steps for strategic planning around equity or anti-racism goals. Specifically, they call for leaders to push their organizations to consider the contexts and conditions of stakeholders, the focus of the goal, the scale and degree of the inequity, the role leaders must plan in systemic and individual change, and the need for a continuous improvement cycle. They believe this deep dive is significant because, without reflection and planning, educators and schools get bogged down and fail to develop equity-based abilities that include "being able to identify the inequity in the subtlest forms, responding immediately and skillfully to inequities, and redressing inequity long-term and sustaining equity efforts" (p. 17). Further, Swanson and Welton (2019) argue districts must continue to offer principals constant coaching on how to lead school-wide change centered on racial equity, and that leaders must continue to practice anti-racist leadership skills.

The Power of Background and Context

All school and district leaders operate within the social, organizational, personal, and occupational contexts of the communities they serve (Tallerico, 2000; Roegman, 2017). Within these contexts, strong leaders establish a moral purpose for their work and negotiate the culture and desires of the community against that larger purpose. This purpose, which school leaders define as *doing what's right for kids*, is focused on ensuring decisions are moral and ethical rather than expedient (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2006). Within a community, historical tensions

quite often define the impact of different voices on the school leader's work. Yet, while these environmental pressures and community characteristics play a powerful role in determining the work a leader can do, Bredeson, Klar, & Johnson (2011) argue effective leaders have "the capacity to shape various contexts in their daily work" to move a school or district toward the moral purpose (p. 18).

The Role of Context in Equity-focused Leadership

Equity-focused leaders enter their work with a goal of restructuring schooling to include counternarratives and practices that support all stakeholders (Marshall & Ward, 2004). Often, this goal is rooted in the leader's personal context and background that provides them with a lens to frame their approach to equity and social justice and prioritize issues they wish to address. This personal background is mediated by the other contexts - the professional norms of the position, the existing structures of the school or district, and the greater socio-cultural forces - to create the field on which leaders make decisions (Roegman, 2017). This push-pull between personal context and the voices of the community is intense, as schools are deeply influenced by the neighborhoods from which they draw students (Cuban, 2001). In many cases, school leaders who don't have a focus on equity are overpowered and make decisions based on constituents' view of the views of the dominant society (Kowalski, 1995; Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001; Tallerico, 2000). Successful leaders, however, push back and reshape these contextual features rather than viewing them as immutable factors destined to constrain the learning environment (Bredons, Klar & Johnson, 2011). Further, these leaders who are willing to create new rules, norms, and systems tend to be career-bound rather than place-bound (Kowalski, 1995)

Contextual Literacy

Bredosn, Klar, and Johansson (2011) argue equity-focused school leaders have a sense of context responsiveness and are contextually literate. They focus their leadership on three dominant themes: (1) keeping equitable student outcomes at the center of focus; (2) the power of vision and mission; and (3) the need for trust and strong relationships. In their work, these leaders are sensitive to and aware of context, purpose, and actions, and are able to engage in fluid thinking and conversations centered on time, moment, place, and people to both react to and shape their contexts. This leads to situations where leaders can reshape elements of the context to create an environment more favorable to the priorities and goals they want to achieve. Ultimately, this literacy builds to what Lomotely (1989a) defines as an ethno-humanist role identity in which the school leader is committed to the education of all students, has confidence in all stakeholders to do well, and has an understanding of and compassion for all students and the communities in which they live.

A Transformational Approach

The power of principals to profoundly affect the lives of their students is clear: school leaders who have an equity-focused lens, a deep understanding of culturally relevant instructional practices, and the ability to cast a clear vision will create a school culture that promotes positive student outcomes (McKenzie & Locke, 2010; Skrla, et al, 2010). To this end, leaders who work to rectify the effects of oppression must deeply understand the roots of that oppression through marginalization and be willing to deconstruct systems and reconstruct them in a way that promotes safety and inclusiveness for their students. This work is innately transformational.

Transformational leadership begins with a critical lens that allows leaders and their team to recognize areas of oppression and engage in meaningful conversations centered on achieving

social justice and equitable access (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). These leaders have an activist soul and a commitment to their work beyond their career aspirations (Shields, 2004). They become agents of change, working with their teams to revise conceptions which allows them to transform systems. This work includes a moral element because leaders and their teams must commit to systemic change that, at minimum, limits the impact of marginalization, and, at best, eliminates it (Sergiovanni, 2007).

Implicit in this work is the development of schools as places of democracy and academic excellence (Dantley & Tillman, 2010). Equity-focused leaders view transformation with a "willingness…to engage in the political act of analyzing and critiquing the taken-for-granted assumption of western society" (Furman & Gruenwald, 2004, p. 65). Further, they encourage dialogue as a way of developing the personal and organizational conceptions of marginalizing factors to limit their impact on student outcomes (Shields, 2004).

Summary

In reviewing the literature, I have established the significant role a building principal plays in student achievement. I began by illustrating the achievement gaps based on educational debt in American society and traced the initial attempts to remedy these debts through a focus on instructional leadership. Then, I traced the roots of the failure of this work by identifying the forces of oppression and the subsequent racism that is implicit in American society. Finally, I illuminated the framework of equity-focused leadership, which, by nature incorporates a critical lens and is transformational. Ultimately, principals who have a focus on equity, recognize the critical issues of oppression, and are able to provide a clear instructional vision and support faculty and staff in this work lead schools where all students have greater access to the opportunity structure and more positive academic outcomes.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In chapter three, I present the research methods design, rationale, and my role as the researcher. I discuss the selection of participants and instrumentation along with research procedures. In addition, I explain the process for data collection and analysis to create meaning.

Design and Rationale

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do principals define the leadership practices they utilize to build systems that result in more equitable outcomes?

2. What are key commonalities of practice and shared traits among the principals of these schools?

Methodology

For this study, I use phenomenological methodology because it allows me to illuminate rich descriptions and personal meanings of lived experiences related to equity-focused leadership. The aim of this study is to examine the lived experiences of school principals who lead schools with more equitable academic outcomes. Rooted in philosophy and psychology, phenomenology is a qualitative research approach which explores the experiences of those living a particular phenomenon. This allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, which are conveyed first hand. In contrast to a narrative study, which focuses on one individual, phenomological studies describe the lived experiences of several people (Cresswell, 2018). The primary goal of phenomological studies is to explicate complex, vivid descriptions of an experience as it was lived in the context of time, space, and relationships (Finaly, 2009).

There are two approaches to phenomological research: descriptive and interpretive. Descriptive phenomology is rooted in the work of Husserl, who sought to determine what we know as people and focused on describing human experiences as "understood and described from the perspective of those who have had the lived experiences and are able to describe it" (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 228). He believed people who used this research method were required to put aside, or bracket, her or his preconceptions and lived experiences to observe only the phenomenon at hand.

 Heidegger's (1927) perspective, however, is that researchers are not able to completely bracket out their own experiences, pre-conceptions, and positionality. Rather, he argues it is through an individual's placement, using their own history and background to develop a lens, that she or he can correctly interpret a phenomenon (Laverty, 2003). Thus, interpretative phenomology seeks to answer the primary question of "What does it mean to Be?" through the interpretation (rather than just the description) of a human experience (Polit & Beck, 2008). Heidegger situated this question by considering the ways a phenomenon might be initially concealed by being undiscovered, where reserachers are unaware the phenomenon exists, buried over, where knowledge was discovered by lost, and/or distorted, in which people see the knowledge within a system that convolutes the truth. Ultimately, the phenomenon becomes known when it is revealed and brought forward to speak for itself. To this end, the phenomological approach seeks to ask the right questions to allow the researcher an opportunity to define meaning hidden in the human experience through a transaction between the researcher, their background and context, and the interpretation of being. Implicit in this theoretical framework is the idea that humans and tools can be without Being – that is, a tool can exist, but it is not until a human recognizes it by ascribing words and meaning that the tool becomes a device to alter an experience.

In this study, a methodology rooted in Heidegger's interpretative phenomological approach will seek, through the lived experiences of school principals, to identify the tools – both personal and professional – they utilize to identify examples of inequity and construct systems that are more equitable and that lead to more equitable outcomes. Further, the study will serve as a foundation for dialogue about leadership in the realms of race, ethnicity, gender, and marginalization.

I seek to explicate data and meaning using a hermeneutical approach. Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation (Van Manen, 1994). Through this process, I interpret the text of the interviews to isolate common themes to gain an understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon of equity-focused leadership. Often, the underlying beliefs, values, and practices of leaders are overshadowed by the scope of the work of management. By entering, as Polit and Beck (2008) write, "another's world to discover the practical wisdom, possibilities, and understandings found there," I lift up the more nuanced leadership practices that are leading to achievement results beyond the norm. These uncovered themes – shared by the participants in their own words about their lived experiences –serve as the source of new knowledge for school leaders.

Ultimately, a hermeneutical approach relies on both description and interpretation to narrate the themes of the lived experiences. This means I seek to let the experiences speak for themselves in situated narratives, then connect these narratives into a more general explanation that allows the reader to identify and understand the possibilities of living such an experience.

Identifying these possibilities happens through the interpretation of the texts in a hermeneutic circle, which allows the researcher to gain an understanding of the phenomenon by "moving from parts of the experience, to the whole of the experience, and back and forth again

and again to increase the depth and level of understanding from within the text" (Faverty, 2003).

Methodologically, this process involves examining the participants description of their own lived

experiences, analyzing the accounts in the context of my own experiences, then developing an

understanding based on the interaction of the two worlds. Ultimately, through reading and re-

reading, I identify the common themes to determine patterns present within all of the

participants' experiences. This process is designed to be fluid with no set number of steps,

leading to a point of saturation, where no new themes emerge. The hermeneutic circle is

presented graphically in Figure 1 (Monaro, Stewart, & Gullick, 2014).

Figure 1

The hermeneutic circle
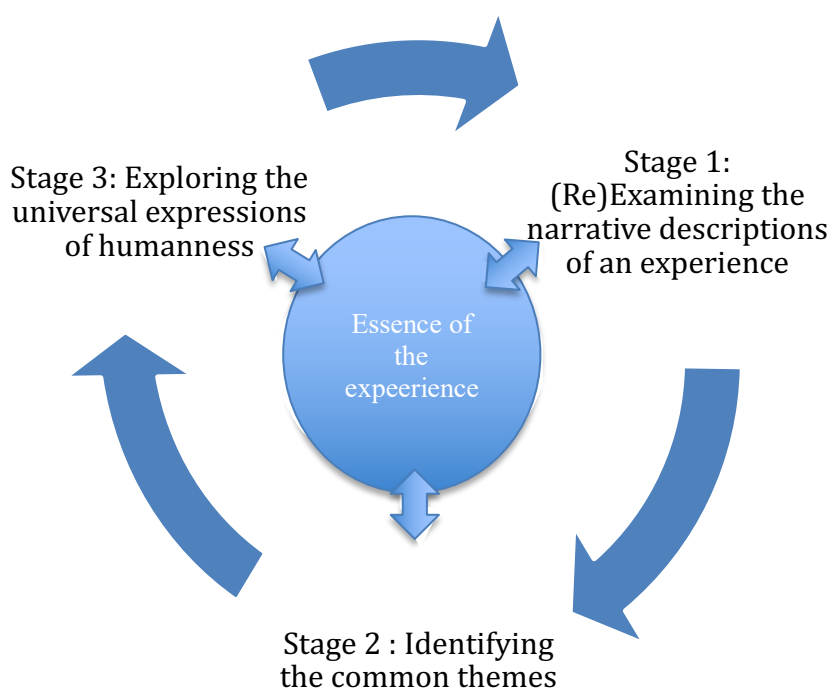
The intended outcome for this approach is to illuminate the lived experiences of equity-

focused school leaders in a way that allows the field to identify the leadership practices, personal

characteristics, and beliefs within the context of the work, rather than separated from it. This is significant because leaders are deeply affected by the context in which they work and impact that context over a period of time.

Researcher role

I enter into this research as a scholar-practitioner. For the past six years, I have served as a middle school principal in a school that fits the demographic description used to identify participants in this study. I am unashamedly a crusader for social justice with a strong background in teaching for social justice and possess a critical lens that guides my leadership of my staff and students. My work over the past 25 years has been both outward and subversive as I help create systems that are both more equitable for students from marginalized backgrounds and catalyze situations where students recognize the privilege they hold. I cannot separate myself from the work to be an objective researcher. Rather, through this research, I hope to more clearly identify the phenomena of equity-focused leadership and become more reflective about my own practices based on the outstanding work of my colleagues.

My role as a principal was also significant in how I conducted the interviews and interacted with the participants. Because we share a common positionality, I was able to engage in conversation, recognize common situations, and show empathy to the participants related to their work. However, I also own the fact that I am a white male and resemble many of the people in district leadership. During the interviews, I was mindful to listen for counternarratives from participants who did not share my race or gender. In addition, I serve in the same district with three of the participants and have worked closely with them through the years in various roles including as colleagues (both as teachers and principals), and in a district support role. I have not served as the supervisor to any of the participants.

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited in a purposive manner and were comprised of principals from a state in the southeastern United States who are leading schools with student bodies that have more than 50 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch, more than 50 percent of the student body who are students of color, are ranked as an "A" or "B" school by the State Department of Public Instruction, and exceeded expected academic growth for the 2018-2019 school year, as measured by the State Department of Public Instruction. The data for this selection is a part of the public record.

Upon applying the criteria, I identified 13 secondary school principals in the state. I reached out to each principal by email to request time to conduct a one-hour interview. I received responses from six of these principals. These six principals are those who provided interviews and comprise the subjects of the study.

The participants in this study all live and work in a state in the Southeastern United States. The state is a political swing state, with a substantial urban population in three major centers along a major interstate. The more rural areas of the state, however, remain sparsely populated. The state's three regions have substantially different demographics: region 1 is predominantly White and rural; region 2 is racially and culturally diverse and primarily urban; and region 3 has a history of racial inequity between Whites, African Americans who are the descendants of enslaved people, and Native Americans. The schools at which the principals work are in each of the regions, with region 2 represented most. The following tables provide insight into the school demographics for the 19-20 school year (Table 1), the historical performance of each participant's school (Table 2), and a more general description of the district in which each school is located (Table 3).

Table 1

School demographics

	School Demographics					Growth Scores*			
Partic ipant	School Region	School Grade	Growth Report	Free/Red Lunch Rate	% White	W	AA	Lat	Econ Dis
P1	1	B	Exceeded	64	20	94.0	90.3	87.2	89.8
P2	3	B	Exceeded	99	49	88.3	93.4	88.9	87.3
P3	2	B	Exceeded	54	42	90.9	81.4	88.0	88.5
P4	2	B	Exceeded	50	48	80.8	85.4	83.2	79.8
P5	2	B	Exceeded	99	35	89.5	88.7	90.6	90.3
P6	2	B	Exceeded	54	43	88.0	87.8	86.2	89.1

Growth score >85 exceeds expected growth.

Table 2

School historical performance

	Growth Score					
Participant	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
P1	64.9	57.6	79.1	63.2	100.0	97.4
P2	78.5	81.6	58.4	84.4	100.0	98.8
P3	82.4	86.5	80.0	82.5	88.8	91.5
P4	81.0	82.6	72.4	81.1	82.3	86.2
P5	80.0	90.0	91.2	96.0	96.2	96.2
P6	56.0	52.2	58.6	57.6	62.8	92.5

Table 3

District demographics

Participant(s)	Number of Schools	% of schools ranked A or B	% of schools exceeded expected growth	Free/Red Lunch Rate	% White
P1	29	40.7	25.9	70.4	60
P2	26	32.0	36.0	56.4	30
P3, P4, P6	39	56.7	63.9	40.3	50
P5	36	20.5	17.6	59.9	40

Participant Demographics

The participants in this study were all born and raised in the Southeastern United States. They are all veteran administrators, each individually with more than 20 years' experience in the field, and all have served as principals for at least five years.

Table 4

Demographics of the sample

Participant	Gender	Race	Years of Principal Experience
P1	Male	White	8
P2	Male	White	8
P3	Female	White	5
P4	Female	African American	17
P5	Female	White	9
P6	Male	White	12

Participant Profiles

Participant 1: Dr. Robinson. Dr. Robinson leads a school in the foothills of the mountains in the western region of the state (region 1). He is originally from the city where the school is located, which has a population of about 20,000 residents, and is about an hour and a half outside of a major metropolitan region. The median income for a household in the city was $29,345, and the median income for a family was $38,603. Males had a median income of $30,038 versus $21,362 for females. The per capita income for the city was $18,708. About 14.3 percent of families and 17.8 percent of the population were below the poverty line, including 26.7 percent of those under age 18.

The district is primarily rural and White, but Dr. Robinson's school is home to most of the African American students in the district and has the highest concentration of poverty.

He noted that he "accidentally became a principal" after serving for several years as a middle grades mathematics teacher in the district where he continues to work. He completed a master's degree in secondary mathematics instruction at a small local private university, then immediately entered a doctoral program with the intention of teaching at the collegiate level. While studying transformational leadership practices, he began to think about how he might initiate change. At the same time, he did some teaching as an adjunct faculty member and "realized I was more fulfilled in the public school setting. That's when the school administration route came up on the radar. I took some add-on classes and became an assistant principal, first at a middle school, then went to high school, became an elementary principal, and finally landed at the middle school level." Dr. Robinson voluntarily left the middle school principalship during the summer of 2020 to take on a new role at an elementary school near his home.

Participant 2: Dr. Turnbridge. Dr. Turnbridge is a principal in a district in the eastern part of the state (region 3) in a rural area. His school is located in a city of about 20,000

residents, with the population declining at an 8 percent clip over the last 20 years. The median income for a household in the city was $26,630, and the median income for a family was $35,867. Males had a median income of $28,688 versus $21,442 for females. The per capita income for the city was $17,779. About 19.7 percent of families and 23.0 percent of the population were below the poverty line, including 32.0 percent of those under age 18. Sixty-three percent of the city's population is African American, while the population of the county in which the city is located is 57 percent White. Dr. Turnbridge is a product of the school district where he works and stated "I was born here and when I die, I will be buried here. It's who I am."

Prior to entering the field of education, Dr. Turnbridge entered seminary in Boston with plans to serve as a youth pastor. His wife became a teacher and they moved back to their home city, where his former basketball coach then served as the principal at the high school where he graduated. He accepted a position teaching health and physical education and coaching football and basketball. After several years as a classroom teacher and the school's athletic director, he was recruited into an assistant principal position, then changed districts to become a principal at the elementary and middle school level. Dr. Turnbridge recently transitioned to a high school position but noted he would have rather stayed at the middle school where his transformational work occurred.

Participant 3: Ms. Donahue. Ms. Donahue is the principal at a school in a district with nearly 40,000 students in a community with over 100,000 residents. The county where she works is immediately adjacent to a major metropolitan city with a regional population of 2.6 million. The median income for a household in the city was $46,094, and the median income for a family was $53,571. Males had a median income of $37,030 versus $26,044 for females. The per capita income for the city was $21,523. About 5.8 percent of families and 8.2 percent of

the population were below the poverty line, including 10.0 percent of those under age 18. The students who attend her school are predominantly Latinx and African American from more impoverished neighborhoods, although the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the school are part of an affluent golf community.

Ms. Donahue grew up in rural West Virginia where nearly 100 percent of students are white and 98 percent of students qualify for free meals, her family included. Her parents did not graduate from high school, and she was the first in her family to attend college. She began as a pre-law student but switched to elementary education after working in a summer youth program.

After graduating, Ms. Donahue worked two years in West Virginia before relocating in the Southeast, where she was hired as a teacher at the school where she now serves as principal. Over the next 20 years, she worked as a classroom teacher, lead teacher, assistant principal, and principal at the same school.

Participant 4: Ms. Duncan. Ms. Duncan is employed in the same district as Ms. Donahue as a principal at the high school level. She grew up in government subsidized housing and graduated with honors from the city's oldest high school. She attended an Historically Black University that was the first Black Teacher's College in the state on an academic and music scholarship.

After graduating with honors, Ms. Duncan returned to her home city to work as a high and middle school English teacher for seven years. She then transitioned to a position as an elementary assistant principal, elementary principal, and now serves as a high school principal. She is one of four African American principals in the district which has 41 schools, and she is one of the longest tenured principals.

Participant 5: Dr. Alexander. Dr. Alexander is a principal in a suburban district in the central part of the state (region 2). Around 675,000 people live in the metropolitan area where her school is located, and her district has just over 54,000 students. The median income for a household in the city was $42,097, and the median income for a family was $49,797. The per capita income for the city was $23,465. About 15.9 percent of families and 19.6 percent of the population were below the poverty line, including 34.9 percent of those under age 18. Dr. Alexander's students are predominantly African American and Latinx, and all students qualify for free/reduced lunch.

She was born in the region where she works and earned her bachelor's degree in English from one of the state's doctoral research universities, her master's degree in educational leadership from a local private university in a cohort program, and her doctorate from a major research institution. She has served as a high school English teacher and coach, assistant principal at the elementary and high school levels, and as a high school and middle school principal.

Participant 6: Dr. Atkins. Dr. Atkins is the principal of a medium-sized high school in a district just outside of a major metropolitan region with a population of 2.6 million. The median income for a household in the city was $46,094, and the median income for a family was $53,571. Males had a median income of $37,030 versus $26,044 for females. The per capita income for the city was $21,523. About 5.8 percent of families and 8.2 percent of the population were below the poverty line, including 10.0 percent of those under age 18. His school is one of the haves and have-nots with around half of the student body residing in a highly affluent "old money" area of the city and half from an historically African American mill community that is highly marginalized.

Dr. Atkins is originally from Florida, grew up in a middle-class family, and graduated from a major university in that state with a degree in elementary education. He moved to the region where he now works to take a position as an elementary school teacher in one of the nation's largest school districts in 1998, then transitioned to his current district in a teacher role three years later. He earned a master's degree in elementary education, then was recruited to an assistant principal position four years later. He worked under a veteran principal for three years, then transitioned as an assistant principal to open a new high school. After two years in that role, he was promoted to principal at one of the district's most impoverished schools and engineered a remarkable turnaround. Five years ago, Dr. Atkins accepted a transfer to a high school in crisis which also experienced a transformation. His doctorate in educational leadership is from a local private university's cohort program.

Instrumentation

This research study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with participants using video technology. This instrument is appropriate because it allows the participant to share her or his personal narrative regarding their experiences. While in-person interviews would have been optimal, the current COVID-19 moment was a primary obstacle. Additionally, rich information could have been acquired during a school visit, but in lieu of this, I gleaned information about the participant's contexts through their school websites, and at this time, I am able to address the research questions through the initial interviews and follow up interviews.

Procedures and Data Collection

This research highlights the important elements of equity-focused leadership as it is lived and how it is experienced by school principals. The focus on lived experience informs the aspects of a human phenomenon. The interview questions directly focused on the participants'

lived experiences as leaders of schools with academic outcomes outside of the norm. These direct questions are designed to illuminate the hidden tools and practices the participants utilize with the staff, students, and other stakeholders.

After confirming an interview time with each participant, I sent them an invitation to a meeting on Zoom. Each interview was scheduled for one hour, though most lasted from 1.5 to two hours. Each interview began with a welcome and introduction, if necessary. In three cases, introductions were not necessary because the participant is a colleague. I briefly reviewed the purpose of the study, which was originally proposed in the email requesting time for the interview and informed the participant I would be asking 12 base questions, but that I may deviate from my protocol if they raised an important point about which I needed more detail. During the interview, I affirmed that I had heard the participant, but did not provide any commentary from my own perspective in order to allow the participant to guide the conversation. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked the participant for their time, informed them I would be sending the transcript of their responses for them to review, and asked if I could reach out with any follow up questions I might have.

The interviews were guided by twelve base questions that sought to gain insight into the participant's lived experiences with equity-focused leadership. I piloted these questions with a colleague in the district who did not meet one of the criteria for selection in the sample. (Her school meets the criteria for race and socio-economic status, is rated as an "A" school, and met, but did not exceed, expected academic growth.) After the pilot interview, I made revisions to the questions to ensure I was effectively inquiring about equity-focused leadership to address the research questions. The base questions were:

1. What is your educational and professional background? How did you end up in this role?

2. What does being a leader mean to you? How do you see yourself as a leader?

3. How does your staff see you as a leader?

4. What are your core beliefs about education and equity? How do you define them?

5. What are some specific leadership practices you utilize in your building?

6. Who or what has played a role in shaping you as a leader for equity?

7. How does your background and positionality affect your approach to leadership?

8. Your school is identified as having strong outcomes for students of color. What do you think has led to this success?

9. To what degree do you feel you have autonomy over your decisions? What role does this play in your leadership?

10. Can you describe some specific challenges you face in your leadership position? How do you deal with or navigate some of those challenges?

11. How do you balance the work of equity with the management of your school?

12. Is there any advice you have for other leaders addressing equity in their schools?

Data Analysis

In line with a phenomenological approach, I evaluated the interviews to explicate the themes within each interview, then compared those themes across the data set. In this work, I kept in mind the goal of illuminating the lived experiences of the participants through emergent analysis, through which my findings would change depending on each narrative. This allowed me to control for varied contexts of the participants (i.e.: urban school settings versus those in rural areas) without sacrificing the essential themes that emerged. Further, I sought to highlight themes that would be apparent to others who are in similar contexts.

First, I listened to each interview immediately following to make any notes of comments I found to be important or telling. Then, over the course of the following days, I transcribed each interview, eliminating any unnecessary language (um, you know, etc.). I reviewed each transcript individually to identify preliminary meaning units from that participant. After completing this work for each interview individually, I reread the transcripts, making adjustments to the preliminary meaning units as the themes emerged. I created categories and subcategories and set examples as definitions for continued coding. This allowed me to generate a list of final meaning units for each interview. I entered this information into a spreadsheet with the final meaning units as headers and the specific narrative components aligned appropriately.

After creating individual spreadsheets to organize the data for each participant, I printed each spreadsheet and cut the individual cells apart to allow for a holistic organization that integrated all of the major themes of the participants. This allowed me to generate situated narratives where each participant's experience was highlighted thematically using direct quotes (Peoples, 2020). The situated narratives are set up as thematic umbrellas where I am able to present each participant's experience independently as a part of the larger theme. This allows the reader to understand the individual perspectives while also following the connection to the unifying themes.

Finally, I used the situated narratives to create a general narrative that integrated all of the key themes from the participants. In this process, I was careful to generate the themes without losing the individual meaning from each participant, as their positionality and context is key to understanding.

Throughout the explication process, I journaled to identify the biases I held based on my own positionality and to develop my conception of the phenomenon. The primary bias I held

was the consideration of the participants' practices and outcomes against my own practices and outcomes. Often, as the participants were sharing their experiences, I naturally compared their efforts to the work I am doing in my school. The threat of bias in these moments was significant. In this research, however, my goal was to ensure I allowed the data to adjust my conception rather than attempting to manipulate the data to fit what I already believed to be true. In addition, I tracked my thinking about race and gender as I analyzed the narratives from participants who are different from me, both to identify my own biases and reflect on how these attributes affect varied perceptions of similar work. Following the analysis, I reached out to participants to ask any final follow up questions to gain more clarity.

Validity and Reliability

To address qualitative rigor, I utilized several procedures from Creswell and Poth (2017) to establish validity. First, I sought to actively identify my biases about equity-based leadership through journaling. Specifically, I wrote prior to creating the interview protocol, before each interview, after each interview, and throughout the coding process. Second, I sent each of the transcripts to the participants for them to review for accuracy. I also sent my preliminary themes and examples to each of the participants so they could review my initial interpretations. Third, I worked with a colleague who is a professor at a university in my area to peer review my methodology, results, and emerging conclusions to establish credibility, accountability, and honesty in my work. Finally, I sought to provide rich, contextual descriptions for each participant to ensure my interpretation matches the context of both their personal positionality and the organizational context in which they work.

Summary

This hermeneutic phenomenological study is designed to identify the lived experiences of equity-focused principals in school with significant academic achievement by students from marginalized backgrounds. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and coded through a spiral revision process to generate general themes centered on leadership practices. Careful attention was paid to the individual participants' context and positionality to highlight the ways in which who they are and where they work affect their lived experiences, while also identifying practices that can be recognized by others who work in similar settings. The analysis of the participants' lived experiences can help inform practice in K-12 schools across the nation.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In chapter four, I present the research findings and connects the findings of the study with both hermeneutic philosophy and the principles of equity-focused leadership. I discuss the process of data collection and analysis. In addition, I explain the general themes I explicate from the lived experiences of the participants.

Findings

Situated Narratives

Through the coding process, several situated narratives emerged across the participants. While each participant clearly contextualized their experiences based on their own positionality and leadership strengths, it became clear the work they were doing was rooted in a common base. These situated narratives and a sample of the coding process are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Table of Situated Narratives

Theme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	Examples from the Data Set
Early experiences related to equity	X	X	X	X	X	X	• I grew up in a very small town in West Virginia with high poverty - 98% of students on free and reduced lunch. All white and lower class. My mom did not finish high school. I was the first person to graduate high school and go on to college. • The elementary school and middle school I went to are almost 100 percent African American, so that's just how I grew up. When I got to Chapel Hill, I started seeing more racial stuff and it became more obvious to me. • So I attended a historically black college, once I got into my major didn't mean historically black, which made it even better because you get that experience of that critical knowledge of who you are and where you really come from.

Table 5 (cont.)

Hiring and assignment of teachers and staff	X	X	X	X	X	X	• The staff would say I'm laser focused on the right hire and getting the right people in the right places. • I'm very big on leveraging individual strengths, and to get there, you have to spend a lot of time getting to know your people. • I see myself as a the head coach and general manager. I build the playbook, but I have to get the right players because if you have a great playbook but terrible players, you aren't going to win any games. I have to get the right people in the right places. That makes the difference.
Establishing a clear vision		X	X	X	X	X	• You can't give inspiring speeches and not follow up with what to do next. You can't give them all of the data and not let them see how they can impact it. It's a balancing act between vision and action. • The most important thing I do is set that vision. I set the tone. Whether that's being the first car in the parking lot every day and being the first person on duty, or being dressed in my black and gold every day. • I can't just get good people and lock them in the building and let them do their stuff. We have to set the big picture - how we want things done - and what's important. Once those structures are in place, they can work out the details.

Table 5 (cont.)

Aware of critical issues of equity	X		X	X	X	X	• We need to have more conversations. We've been doing a lot to learn about systemic racism with our community and our schools. Our social worker has been leading book clubs and conversations. Your experiences shape your views. I have to provide people with new experiences where they can develop a better understanding. If they understand better, their thoughts and actions will change. • I worked with a parent who told me, "We are going to get to know each other real well because you have two of my children and I have to make sure you know what it's like to be Black in America." I have to acknowledge that I have no idea what it's like to be Black. I have to put people around me who can teach me and support our parents and children.
Urgency of reflection and improvement	X		X	X	X	X	• One thing that challenges me are fixed ideas. Sometimes we feel we are bogged down by bureaucray, but in my district, our superintendent talks about earned autonomy, and I've felt empowered to make the school based decisions I can and that's led to the success we've had. I feel supported to handle matters in my building. • We knew if ESL students exited the program before they left us, they had like a 70% greater chance to graduate high school. We were able to get 28 out and I told the staff, that's 28 kids we gave a chance to graduate. That's what equity looks like. • One of the biggest mistakes you can make in this job is to just keep doing things the way we've always done them. If it ain't working, stop. It doesn't work. So we have to change things. We have to try something. If we try it and it doesn't work either, we just keep trying.

Table 5 (cont.)

Sense of autonomy	X X X X X X	• All three principals I worked for had a mindset of "I'm going to do what I want." They didn't follow the party line, but they got things done. That was reinforced. It was hardheadedness. It helped me see as a beginning pricnipal that I could do the same thing. Hopefully, it doesn't end like a Greek tragedy with arrogance. • My autonomy comes from experience. The people above me probably say I'm a wild card. They know there's always a chance I'll go off the rails. But it always seems to work. I know when to pull it in and I know what to say at the right times. • I think I totally buck the system. The other principals say, "Well, he's just going to do what he wants to do anyway." But I don't hide it. I'm upfront about it. We can't keep doing things the way we always have if it's not good for kids.
Intense focus on students and their achievement	X X X X X X	• If you make a mistake here, it better be in favor of a kid. That's our true north. If we are even in a moment of doubt, that will show us the way. • You want to support students and their families and you want to support teachers. You're constantly balancing these three balls in the air. • It has to be about the kids. If you have the right grownups that are for the kids, it'll be fine. You have to hold the line. It's hard work. But get your megaphone and make it right for kids.
Power of building strong relationships	X X X X X X	• I took the time to get to know the teachers, know their situations, and play to their strengths. • I use the word power, but I don't mean it in a negative way. I don't want to have power over people. I want to have the power to influence people. I want to have the platform. Being a leader means you have a platform to influence change and you should always look at that platform as an opportunity to support students, families, and teachers. • We had a student in our building tell a teacher, "Do you know why I don't do the work. I can't read." They will tell you those kinds of things when you build the relationships with them.

Table 5 (cont.)

High expectations for students and staff	X	X	X	X	X	X	- There was a mindset of sympathy for the backgrounds of students, but not necessarily the expectations that go with it, and we know to escape poverty is education. It about what we do in those classrooms. - I have high expectations. Being a leader is influencing others through your actions, through your words, your your example of what's expected, what has to happen, and what is best for students and families. - You have to believe every kid can achieve. If you don't really believe that then your outcome is never going to come to fruition. It's never going to happen. - We have established a culture of high expectations. With kids from marginalized backgrounds, they have to know they can do it and we have to support and help them. We do have to triage to get things right. But if you have high expectations and you put in the right support, they will get there.
A love ethic	X	X	X	X	X	X	- Kids need to know that someone cares and loves you and wants you to do your best. Then know where that student is, make them aware of where they are, and set a goal with them. And involve their parents. We moved from awards ceremonies to student showcases. I want parents in classrooms seeing what kids need to be doing. - Kids want somebody that respects them, has high expectations for them, and loves them in an appropriate way. And when you get staff that can do that, it's all going to be fine.

Early experiences related to equity. Most participants expressed an early exposure to equity, either in their childhood or at the beginning stages of their teaching career. Ms. Donahue recalled her childhood:

> I grew up in a very small town in West Virginia with high poverty. I was the first person [in my family] to graduate from high school and go on to college…. Being from a high poverty family with government assistance and food stamps, I know what it's like to wait for your clothing voucher. I know what it's like to have food at the beginning of the month and not at the end. [This helps me] see other people's perspectives and understand that families are really struggling; they're not just playing the system.

In considering the impact of her background on her work, Ms. Duncan shared that because she grew up in the same neighborhood where many of her students live, she has a better understanding of their circumstances:

> Fast forward though high school to college, I graduated from University, which is historically known as the first Black teacher's college in North Carolina. And I have a great deal of pride because coming from subsidized housing - I lived in the projects - the only professional Black people I had ever seen were in my church.

Ms. Duncan stated she strives to not only be a role model for students, but also works to introduce them to other role models so they can see beyond their currently situation.

> While Dr. Robinson grew up in a middle-class home, he cites his early experiences in his teaching career as helping him see issues of equity:

> Early in my career, I taught standard classes with really bright students of color. We had some leadership changes who were really progressive and started deliberately working on adding more students of color to the honors classes. These were A/B students who had never been in an honors environment. I think back to that situation a lot, as a moment when my eyes were opened.

He believes this early experience in the classroom was significant because it opened his eyes to inequities he did not recognize as a child.

Several other participants clearly recalled examples from their childhoods that exposed them to unjust and unfair situations. Dr. Alexander, for example, recalled a time in her own middle school experience that allowed her to have empathy for her students:

> I honestly think my honesty and genuineness gives me power. I'm honest that I didn't have the test scores other people had. I'm still not a good reader; it makes me nervous. To this day, I rehearse the announcements before I get on there to say them. I talk to our students about the times in middle school I was picked on. A kid ripped up my book and called me a lesbian. I know what it's like for many of the kids in our building.

Dr. Turnbridge also reached back to his time in school, growing up in the same town where he now works, attending schools with students who have a different positionality from his own:

> The elementary school and middle school I went to are almost 100 percent African American, so that's just how I grew up. When I went to college, I really started seeing more of the racial stuff and that when it became clearer to me.

Early life and early-career experiences related to inequities help to build a foundational understanding for the participants that moves them beyond a positionality of a school manager who guides the operation of a previously designed system. Rather, these leaders have a conception of the inherent inequities in the system, which serves as an initial step in disrupting the system. Their ability to identify and articulate example of inequity within the structures in which they work helps to build a positionality where ensuring equity is a priority in their professional work.

Establishing a clear vision. Four of the participants spoke about the importance of establishing a clear vision for staff and students in which all children can be successful. Dr. Atkins articulated the power he holds in setting the vision for his school:

> The most important thing I do is set that vision. I set the tone. Whether that's being the first car in the parking lot every day and being the first person on duty or being dressed in my black and gold every day. I can't just get good people and lock them in the building and let them do their stuff. We have to set the big picture - how we want things done, and what's important. Once those things are clear, the teachers will work out the details.

When discussing his vision for the school, Dr. Turnbridge articulated his core beliefs as the means by which he works to improve the situation for students and teachers:

> I have five core beliefs. First, we are going to maintain a safe and orderly environment. I tell parents we are going to send your child home a little better every day because we are going to keep them safe. The second is to maintain a positive school culture. Third is to focus on high student learning and effective teaching. Fourth is to hold high expectations for all stakeholders. And fifth is to be consistent.

Ms. Donahue believes, however, that just setting a vision is not enough. Instead, she shared an example that connects vision with action:

> You can't just give inspiring speeches and not follow up with what to do next. You can't give [the teachers] all of the data and not let them see how they can impact it. It's a balancing act between vision and action. We have these core beliefs. And if I come into your classroom and see you doing something that doesn't correlate to our vision and beliefs, I'm going to call you on it.

This connection between vision and action is significant in her eyes because, as an equity-focused leader, she actively seeks out alignment to the vision as examples for others, and consistently redirects when members of her team are misaligned.

Ms. Duncan's example is similar to Ms. Donahue's. She explains that simply stating the vision, and even putting into a school improvement plan, is insignificant if the school doesn't have a focus on the details of the work and the more intricate issues involved in improvement:

> People talk about, "You have to have a school improvement plan." And yes, that's great. Put your school improvement plan up there. But if I can't tell you what our issues are and how we're addressing that, then what good is that written plan that I posted on the webpage?

Ultimately, the leaders believe their ability to cast a common vision focused on student achievement and equity plays a significant role in their faculty taking the steps to reach their goals. These leaders understand a major function of their work is to define the present reality for the stakeholders they are leading and then to craft a vision for what might be in a more equitable world. In creating the vision for their school, they are setting clear expectations about what is important, and on which the school's leadership and faculty will focus.

Intense focus on students and their achievement. Based on the clear vision, all six participants established the importance of keeping every function of the school focused on students and their achievement.

Dr. Turnbridge commented that he finds his "inspiration by watching kids get better. The kids from tough backgrounds can be tough, but I got in this to work with kids, and I expect the staff to do the same." Dr. Alexander mirrored that thought:

I am for kids first. No doubt. There's no question there. I believe we are a customer

service agency first and an employment agency for adults second…. People who inherit

me [as a principal] have a learning curve because I am all about the children and that's an

opposite reaction sometimes to what teachers want. They want it to go teacher and then

kid, and I go kid then teacher, and it usually takes people some time to figure out that I'll

look after teachers, too. But it's by looking after kids that I take care of teachers.

This focus on staff empowerment based on student success is significant among all of the

participants and is mirrored in their experiences. When Dr. Robinson arrived at his school, for

example, he immediately began to refocus the staff:

There were so many top-down processes and I thought, 'this must not be working

because we're the lowest performing school in the district.' I immediately said, let's stop

that and focus on what matters. I go with Bob Sutton's thought that I own the place, but

the place also owns me, and that's the mindset I want to spread. These are all our kids;

this is all our responsibility, so let's roll up our sleeves and get it done. And, most

importantly, I want the staff to know that if you make a mistake here, it better be in favor

of a kid. That's our true north. If we are ever in a moment of doubt, that will show us

the way.

Dr. Atkins echoed these experiences, noting "it has to be about the kids. If you have the right

grownups that are there for the kids, it'll be fine. You have to hold the line on that; it's hard

work, but you get your megaphone and make it right for kids." He emphasized, however, that

principals must have thick skin to move the focus in a school in crisis:

You have to have thick skin because if you are going to turn something around, you're

going to piss some people off. And you have to be ok with that. I put my head down at

night just fine knowing I've made some people mad. But it's for the right reasons: it's

for the kids. Early on, I always get lots of complaints. It's hard on my wife, but I'm ok

with it. I know I'm making the place better for the kids.

While she worries less about making people upset, Ms. Donahue frames her focus around

her ability to get her staff to reach more children, and her focus on students' lives more in the

instructional realm:

As a young teacher, you start out with that small group and your educational reach is 20.

Then I became a lead teacher, so my reach became 250 or 300. And now as the principal,

it's 1,000 and I just want to keep extending the educational reach to help provide access

for all students. Through my transitions, I've lost some people, and I've lost some

respect for people. But I just have to keep focusing on all of the kids I'm helping. We

have to always find out which students are still struggling and give them what they need.

We have to put all of our support around them. I have high expectations of my staff. I

believe being the leader is influencing others through your actions, through your words,

and your example of what's expected. We focus on doing what's best for students and

families.

Ultimately, the participants all maintain this intense focus on students and their success. At her

school, Ms. Duncan establishes that the entire purpose of her work is to support students:

I want to serve some good people for the people who do the job well in the classroom

because that's what we should do for students. I want them all to know I care, and I need

them to care. I know that sounds so cliche, but I'm a mama bear when it comes to my

students. I don't care what color they are, they're mine. And they're first and my

teachers are a close second. But everything about what I do is for kids who are

marginalized. I don't care what color they are, they all have great potential. It's my life's work to make sure that somebody sees them and appreciates them, and they understand what they can bring to the table.

This work, however, does disrupt a system designed to deviate to the norm. Ms. Duncan shared an experience where her focus on students conflicted with an assistant superintendent after she requested additional math teacher allotments because she needed to be able to support students who were struggling and offer higher level math classes.

And that person didn't care. They said, this is your number, make it happen. And I was going to have to either cut classes that got kids into college so I could have fewer in the classes for kids that weren't ready yet, or I was going to increase the struggling kids' class sizes to make a way for kids to get into college. And that was wrong, and I fought it.

As school leaders, the participants in this study place their focus on students and their achievement rather than as managers of a pre-designed system. To this end, they are intensely focused on making changes to the system that will lead to stronger outcomes for students. This focus, which seems obvious, is actually counter to the historical narrative of schooling, which is systematically designed to produce disproportionate outcomes. In placing a focus on students rather than the system, the participants naturally become disrupters because this is a means to improve results.

Making the right hires and supporting great teachers. While the leaders clearly guarantee the focus of the school's work is on students, they are also aware they must have the right staff in place for students to succeed. Each of the six participants articulated the need to hire well and support their very best staff. When asked about what worked to turn around his

school, Dr. Turnbridge stated bluntly, "It was the teachers. They just got after it." Dr.

Alexander also emphasized the need for a top-notch staff, noting they made up for her

shortcomings: "One thing that's important to me is to be the instructional leader. But I don't

know it all, so I have to be authentic and transparent, then surround myself with people who are

masters of their crafts."

Dr. Robinson stated he is "laser focused on the right hire and getting the right people in

the right places." He continued:

We do everything we can for the students, and we do everything we can for the teachers

and staff members so they can bring out the best in students. I'm very big on leveraging

individual strengths, and to get there, you have to get to know your people. To get

equitable outcomes, I have to have people with the right mindset. For example, I knew I

needed to find great math teachers. Once I did that, I built the schedule so every student

in my building that was not proficient in math had one of those three teachers for at least

45 minutes a day.

Ms. Duncan's approach is very similar, as she notes her staff must have the same intense focus

she does:

We recruited and we've retained teachers who felt the same way. They all go at it

differently, but they believe we aren't willing to lower the bar because you're a poor

Black kid or poor Hispanic kid. I hired my folks to figure out how to get around barriers.

They know how to get kids to raise themselves up to the level we need…. I have some

brainiacs around me who focus on the right things, and I just have to take care of those

folks.

Finally, Dr. Atkins focused much of his interview on his intense work to make sure he has the right staff in his building:

> I see myself as the head coach and general manager. I build the playbook, but I have to get the right players because if you have a great playbook, but terrible players, you aren't going to win any games. I have to get the right people in the right places. That makes the difference. I know I can't do everything; I have to have the right people who know how to get things to move. We think differently here. We hire well and give people the space to do their work.

He also considers race, ethnicity, and gender in his hiring, but opts to get a great teacher first every time:

> Kids need to see positive role models of all genders and races; that's good for kids. I want the staff to mirror the kids, but that's not always possible. I'd love to have more Hispanic teachers. But an awesome White female teacher is better than any bad teacher. Quality is the most important thing to me.

Dr. Atkins shares Dr. Robinson's ideas about teacher assignment.

> You really have to think about how to match the teacher who are your best with the kids who need them the most. That is a real shift for a lot of high school teachers. They think, "I've been here the longest and I want the honors and AP sections." We can't put the newest teachers with the kids who need the most support. I put the veterans with those kids. The most important part is getting the right people teaching in the rooms, then find what you need to meet kids' needs.

He emphasizes principals need to:

Hire, recruit, and support great teachers. This is the best way to build equity. If you have the right teachers in the building, the playing field levels. Put people in the right places, give them the right challenges, provide the right support, praise them, and keep them.

And if we support and take care of our best, then that keeps building culture and that's what gets kids to grow. If the worst don't feel good about it, or they don't like it, they either need to get better or get going. And that's what I've done.

Relationships and support. All participants shared stories about their need to build relationships with faculty, and the need for teachers to build strong relationships with students. These relationships allowed the principal to refocus the school on the clear vision and center the work on student achievement. Ms. Donahue recalls her first years as the building's principal, after serving as a teacher and assistant principal for many years:

I spent my first year as the principal building relationships and building a foundation. After those relationships were built, we were able to kick it into high gear. The next year, we met growth - every kid in that school had a year's worth of growth. I was thankful, but then we said that would not be enough. We learned what to do together; we learned how to move kids. That came from being around people who built strong relationships with one another.

Dr. Robinson took a similar approach. When he begins his time at a new school, he takes the time "to have one-on-one interviews with the entire staff. I take this time to get to know the teachers, know their situations, so I can play to their strengths." On a similar note, Dr. Alexander reflected on an example a previous mentor shared with her related to her interactions with faculty:

Early on in my career, I told one of my mentors that I wanted a BMW, and he said, "not while you are in education. You never drive a car more expensive than the people around you." I learned from him to never forget the roots of where you come from. As a leader, you build relationships with your teachers and you help them because you can't forget what it was like to be in a classroom. You don't make decisions without thinking through how it looks through the eyes of your teachers. You have to know them and you have to put yourself in their shoes.

The most significant decision the participants believe they make is hiring the faculty and staff in the building. A powerful vision is useless unless the stakeholders who can support and carry out the vision are capable of doing so. Further, because the leaders have a strong focus on students, they are hiring to support students rather than to continue the system. This leads to strategic recruiting, hiring, and support of teachers who have the skill set to cognitively and behavorially engage all learners, provide the appropriate instructional scaffolding, and build strong classroom community, all of which ultimately result in improved student outcomes.

Rigorous expectations and a love ethic. All principals discussed the need for the staff and students to have high expectations for themselves and for each other. Drs. Robinson and Atkins both decried a mindset of sympathy and called for expectations with support. Dr. Robinson stated:

There was a mindset of sympathy for the backgrounds of students but not necessarily the expectations that go with it. We know the way to escape poverty is through education. That's why we have to have high expectations in those classrooms. To build equity, we have to pay deliberate attention and those expectations have to be there."

Dr. Atkins echoed this sentiment:

You can't have the poor baby syndrome. We can't think, "Oh, they're poor. Oh, their parents are terrible." You have to have high expectations. Kids will reach them. We have established a culture of high expectations. Kids from marginalized backgrounds have to know they can do it and we have to support and help them. We do have to triage sometimes to get things right, but if you have high expectations and you put in the right support, they will get there.

Ms. Duncan reflected on her early years as a principal and considered the impact leaders' expectations have on students' ability to succeed:

If we're not careful, we'll exploit kids, some of the demographic underrepresented groups, we'll exploit their neediness. And it was never our intent to do that. But you have to know that's what you're doing and then you have to stop it. And then you have to put things in place to keep that from happening. You have to teach that, you have to teach that to teachers. What does that look like? It looks like when you give them a grade for participation, that's what that looks like.

On a similar note, Dr. Turnbridge believes high expectations are a key part of the transformational process: "My mentor guided me to think transformationally and that's how I want to guide teachers. To transform, you have to set high expectations and we have to be role models for kids and each other." He continued, noting, "once we gave the teachers structure and support and set the high expectations in place, everyone really rose up." Ms. Donahue concurred: "I told the staff, 'You can do this! It is all in your reach! You are what they need! You are enough!' And we started showing examples of times kids were successful. We showed them that ESL kids can read on grade level. I had to make it real for them."

A structured love ethic. Five of the participants discussed the need for a structured love ethic, in which students feel loved and supported, but also have a clear understanding of how school must operate.

Ms. Donahue, who works with students in the intermediate grades, stated:

Kids need to know that someone cares and loves you and wants you to do your best. Then, we have to know where that student is, make them aware of where they are, and set goals with them. And we have to involve their parents and families in their support. I want parents to see that we love their child and what their child has to do to be successful.

In defining the importance of relationships, Dr. Alexander recalled an example of a child who confessed to the teacher why she was misbehaving:

We had a student in the building who was misbehaving, and the teacher worked hard to get to know the kid. One day, the kid asked her, "Do you know what I don't do the work? I can't read." They will tell you these kinds of things when you build relationships with them. Then, you can work on getting better from there.

She continued, "I teach my staff and students to be kind in everything they do. That's how we have to operate. It doesn't matter your test scores. It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, or your income. You have to be kind and that will take you far."

Ms. Duncan reflected that in her school, she works to cultivate a culture where people learn to work together and respect one another:

We make sure students are thinking and that, above and beyond off the academic curriculum we can cover, embedded in that is what we hopefully are really getting across

to them: You own individual purpose and your own individual gain in this life does not supersede what's good for all, our communal commitment to one another.

In working with students in the upper grades, however, Dr. Turnbridge discussed that he and his staff show love through the structure:

I've done some things that are pretty old school. We discipline the hell out of kids; we are very strict. I don't think it's a black-white, rich-poor thing. I think it's about keeping kids safe because they don't always have that at home. A lot of kids don't get the structure. Often their parents are either working or gone, so when they come to school, they need to see that adults care for them and love them. I've always believed we need to treat students in the same way we raise our own kids. If you set an expectation, kids are going to do what you ask them to do. If you don't set an expectation, they won't. I honestly don't think there's much difference between being a principal and being a parent.

In his use of the words, "disciplines the hell out of kids," Dr. Turnbridge is referring to a clear set of expectations and consequences he immediately put in place when he arrived at the school. He commented that the previous principal was trained as a counselor and took an approach framed by that positionality. However, he believes the students were taking advantage of that lack of structure and consequnces, leading to a situation where classrooms and the school were unsafe and unfocused. In this regard, he sought to make the expectations and consequences for student behavior clear and swift, which he thinks brings a sense of safety and security, and creates an environment where learning can occur. Further, he states, while those structures and consequences are necessary, they have to be fair, and that by creating that fairness, they are showing support:

What I can't do - and it's a very biblical principle, the Book of James talks a lot about favoritism - I can't put my head on my pillow at night if I treated one kid differently from another and someone calls me on that. I can't do that. So I'm not making exceptions for one student unless it benefits all of our students.

Dr. Atkins concludes that "kids want somebody that respects them, has high expectations for them, and loves them in an appropriate way. And when you can get staff to do that, things are going to be fine." He cautions however, that the love often has to be tough:

There has to be tough love. I'm not afraid to suspend them. I tell parents, "Every place in this building is for learning. If Johnny is not ready to learn, he can't do anything here. He has to go home." Parents realize quickly that Johnny better cut that shit out and go back to school. And when they come back, we love them and welcome them back. I tell them "Welcome back. I love you. Just don't do that…again."

This focus on a structured love ethic is a key component in building strong school and classroom community. While the participants who lead high schools certainly have more of a focus on discipline structures and systems, all of the principals recognize strong community, rooted in love and respect, is key to engaging students and keeping them in class. The participants also believe consistency is important because students need to understand what is expected of them and that they are cared for even when they are learning how to navigate the systems.

Awareness of the critical issues of equity. The participants all expressed an understanding of the critical aspects of equity, though they couched these in their own context.

Ms. Duncan explored her understanding through her own positionality as an African American female who grew up in poverty. She commented that her background affects her decisions about her work:

> I was the Black girl that was the only Black person in the class. I give God the glory for anything that I've ever been able to experience that I didn't earn. But it hurt me when folks would say I didn't deserve it or that I was selected because I was a token, that you had to pick at least one Black. That always pissed me off, excuse my expression. It made me feel like I had to go much harder.

She believes her experience at an HBCU helped her frame a critical understanding: "My experience at the school with people who looked like me and others who didn't - because the college of education was more integrated - I got that experience of critical knowledge and helped me know who I was and where I really came from." In considering her support of students in light of her understanding, she referenced a former superintendent who moved her into a principalship:

> I would say he had the biggest impact on me. He saw I had potential, where I didn't think I did. But he was the first White man to look at me and say, "We are failing black men and Black boys in our schools." He asked me what I was going to help him do about it. And then he put it right back in my hands. Any role I've played, I've tried to ensure that the field is level.

Dr. Robinson's conception of equity is framed in his own privilege: "My gut reaction is that we have the privilege that race is something we don't ever have to think about. I guess the extension to that is back to the obligation of realizing it falls upon me and my team to lead and do what's right for all students." Dr. Atkins considered his background, as well:

I'm passionate about schools, teachers, and kids who need strong leadership. I don't

share the background with many of our students. I mean, I didn't grow up in government

housing. We were lower middle class. But I know education can be the great equalizer,

and to build it right, to support kids, you have to make the system fair.

Dr. Alexander stated it's important to ensure all voices are heard, and that she continues to try to

learn through counternarratives:

I worked with a parent who told me, "We are going to get to know each other real well

because you have two of my children and I have to make sure you know what it's like to

be Black in America." I have to acknowledge that I have no idea what it's like to be

Black. I have to put people around me who can teach me and support our parents and

children. I have to empower people to make sure everyone's voices are heard.

Ms. Donahue defined equity through the lens of seeing children for their character rather than

their physical or personal characteristics:

Equity is looking deeper than the color of their skin or where they live or what their

demographics are. It's about knowing at their heart they are all wanting to [do well].

With equity, we have to know that everybody has this special offering for our world.

And we have to find out what that is. Everybody brings something that makes our world

better. And it's our job to make sure they have a platform to shine with what's important

to them.

She described the work she is doing in her school to help folks see the issues of inequity so they

can better support children:

I do professional development with people of color so my staff can see and hear their

stories. We need to have more conversations. We have been doing a lot to learn about

systemic racism in our community and in our school. Our social worker has been leading

book clubs and conversations. I believe your experiences shape your views. I have to

provide people with new experiences where they can develop a better understanding. If

they understand better, their thoughts and actions will change.

Taking action. Four participants discussed the need to take action to ensure all children

have an equitable access to the opportunity structure. Dr. Robinson stated that "if we miss the

mark on making sure kids have access, we will miss greater things we will not be able to get

back." Ms. Donahue framed her own power in the ability to get others to take action:

> I use the word power, but I don't mean it in a negative way. I don't want to have
>
> power over other people. I want to have the power to influence people. I want to have
>
> that platform. Being a leader for equity means you have a platform to influence change
>
> and you should always look at that platform as an opportunity to support students,
>
> families, and teachers.

> I want to help people be better at their job. I can teach! I was the district Teacher
>
> of the Year! I know how to teach kids, but I want to move adults. I want to lead because
>
> that is where the change occurs.

Ms. Duncan's conception of action is built on collective empowerment:

> Every bit of what we do starts with the philosophical undergirding and understanding of
>
> our purpose to make things better for children. Then you can get into pedagogy and
>
> curriculum. But it starts with a desire to make things better. That's the path forward: we
>
> have to go up together. We have to build it together.

The participants also referenced examples of times they took action to ensure student

success. Dr. Robinson stated, "We let math be the biggest driving force scheduling wise, and

made sure students who need the most support get the best math teachers so it isn't a curse that follows them for years to come." Dr. Atkins commented one of his biggest moves was to "get away from the 90-minute classes. We started the skinnies and our data immediately got better. Kids were learning - all kids." In her school, Ms. Donahue shared her focus on English Language Learners:

We knew if ESL students exited the program before they left us, they had a 70% greater chance to graduate from high school. We were able to get 28 kids out and I told the staff, that's 28 kids we helped graduate. That's what equity looks like. You can't just talk about it. You have to take action.

Reflection and consistent improvement. Four participants explained they are always in a state of reflection for both personal and organizational growth. In considering operational and instructional issues that arose in his school, Dr. Turnbridge believes "you can't get bogged down in the excuses - they're always going to be there. You have to look at problems as puzzles and start working on ways to solve them." Ms. Donahue echoed his thoughts: "I love the problem solving and the collaboration to make sure kids all receive high quality instruction. I believe you have to show people the data. They have to have a space where we can talk about the data in a positive way. We have to ask, 'What can I get better at? What is my next step?'"

Dr. Robinson focused his response on his experience with creative problem solving to get at the issues of inequity in his building:

We have to look for creative solutions and best practices. None of us got into this for the status quo. I'm always open to those creative solutions. I believe we want to work our teachers as hard as we can, but not any harder. We have to keep asking: what are things that have been done for years that don't add any value? We have to get that off of the

teachers. And on a personal level, there's always more for me to learn. That's our North Star: we learn, get better, and always move forward.

On a similar note, Dr. Atkins argued:

One of the biggest mistakes you can make in this job is to just keep doing things the way we've always done them. If it ain't working, stop! So we have to change things. We have to keep trying things. If we try it and it doesn't work either, we just keep trying. As a principal, you a little bit everywhere, and I love that. I get to see the good things, and I get to help fix the bad things. That's how we went from the worst school in the district to becoming a B school for the first time ever.

He couched this, however, regarding his personal reflection: "I take feedback from the people I respect, the ones that do a great job. If I think you're terrible, I don't care what you have to say."

A sense of autonomy. All participants explained they have a strong sense of autonomy to make decisions that are right for their staff, students, and families, though they earned and utilize that sense very differently. Dr. Turnbridge is careful to make sure his sense of autonomy does not completely fight the system:

I have autonomy, but I know my box and I work inside my box. Sometimes that box is bigger than others. I won't break policy or law, but I use my autonomy. The hardest thing that challenges me is the micropolitical piece. My superintendent has tried to teach me how to dance and I just don't dance. I've had to learn how to lose some battles to win a war. I get frustrated at this and I wear my frustration on my sleeve; it's really obvious.

He also believes his autonomy comes from his competitiveness: "I'm very driven in that I hate losing. I play by the rules, but I want to win."

Dr. Robinson believes his sense of autonomy comes from his experience under other autonomous leaders:

> I learned under three principals with very different styles, but I gained the wisdom and confidence to do what I think is the right thing to do. I solve problems. All three of those principals had a mindset of "I'm going to do what I want." They didn't follow the party line, but they got things done. That was reinforced in me. It was hardheadedness. But it helped me see as a beginning principal that I could do the same thing. I always hope it doesn't end like a Greek tragedy.

He also recognizes the difficulty in dealing with the power structure in his district. He stated they often have fixed ideas, which frustrate him:

> Sometimes we feel like we are bogged down by the bureaucracy, but our superintendent likes to talk about earned autonomy. This has helped me feel empowered to make the school-based decisions that I can, and I think that's led to the success we've had.

> Dr. Alexander believes her autonomy has branded her a wild card, but feels she the power structure recognizes what she brings to the table:

> My autonomy comes from experience. The people above me probably say I'm a wild card. They know there's always a chance I'll go off the rails. But it seems to work. I know when to pull it back and I know what to say at the right time. My superintendent told me he might not know what I'm going to do, but he has faith in me because I don't have a lot of issues. So I guess I must be doing something ok.

> Dr. Atkins takes a very forthright approach to his leadership and is very confident in his ability to transform the school. He stated he told the superintendent, "I'm not worried about us not being good. We will be." This confidence allows him to make bold decisions:

I know people think I'm full of myself. I am confident. But I always tell them, "This is what we are doing. You can use it if you want. I'm not going to force it on you, but it will work for us. I totally buck the system all the time. The other principals say, "Well, he's just going to do what he wants to do anyway." But I don't hide it. I'm upfront about it. We can't keep doing things the way we always have if it's not good for kids.

Ms. Donahue is more subtle in her approach. She states that "autonomy comes in how we go at things. I have it. But in having autonomy, we can't compromise on outcomes. We have to stay focused on doing what's right for kids."

Ultimately, their ability to take action is what makes these leaders different from their counterparts. Leaders who have a strong vision but are not able to translate that vision into action stall in their attempts to disrupt inequitable systems. Due to their strong sense of autonomy and a type of moral compass pointed toward student achievement, the participants are able to set forth specific, manageable, and measurable steps that lead to improved outcomes for all students, and specific subgroups of students.

General Narrative

All of the participants set a very clear vision for the direction of their schools and the ways in which they want their faculty and staff to interact with students. Their visions, and the corresponding practices, have a common characteristic of being intensely focused on students with a secondary focus on supporting faculty. The participants clearly have high expectations of the teachers and believe making the right hires is the most important component of school transformation. They believe in the power of building relationships with faculty members to learn their strengths, which allows them to assign the right teachers to the students who need them the most.

A second general theme that arose among the participants is the need for high expectations. Each participant has an unwavering dedication to excellence, clearly articulating both the vision of this success and the pathway by which they reach positive outcomes for students. Throughout the interviews, all participants referred to a need to have an understanding of students' situations and positionality, but that students had to rise to a level of excellence. The participants cited a need for scaffolding for students as they learned to meet the expectations but made clear that schools must not permanently support students, as that perpetuates social reproduction.

Implicit in high expectations is a structured love ethic. The participants all cited the need for students to feel loved and supported but couched this support in a requirement that students follow clearly set procedures. While all participants cited structure as an important component of school transformation, the principals of the upper grades focused significantly more on discipline than did those who worked with students in younger grades.

A third general theme is the sense of autonomy the participants possess and the power of reflection and improvement. All of the principals believed they have autonomy to make decisions that are best for their students and staff. They also all believe they have earned this autonomy, although some participants were much more direct about taking ownership of their decisions, even in the face of resistance. While all participants operate outside of the norm, several of the participants took pride in being known as "wild cards" who are unpredictable and unrelenting in the face of pressure to conform.

The participants all have very different backgrounds, but each was able to cite an example of a time they began to recognize the inequities implicit in America's schooling systems. Ms. Donahue and Ms. Duncan clearly make connections between their own childhoods

in poverty with the students in their care who are coming from similar backgrounds, and each of

these principals believe they have a moral obligation to improve access to the opportunity

structure for those (and all) students. The other participants, while coming from more middle-

class backgrounds also have moments early in their careers where they began to reach an

understanding between marginalization and life success.

On this note, along with this autonomy, all of the participants all reference a need for reflection and

improvement. They stated a dissatisfaction with the status quo, and always questioned processes

and policies that did not lead to positive outcomes for students or support for staff. They each

possess the ability to consistently and intentionally reflect upon their own actions and the work

of the school to find opportunities for growth and improvement. The move toward improvement

was always focused on student outcomes and support for staff.

On this note, two of the participants, both of whom worked at the high school level,

raised issues related to their own positionality and how they are seen by district leadership. Dr.

Alexander cited an example of her mentor telling her to buy a power suit because she would

always have to prove she was "good enough to be playing on that field." Ms. Duncan's

experiences with racism in her own life help drive her determination. She recalled being

considered a token when she was a high school student, and stated she thinks people may still

feel this way, even after she was named state regional principal of the year. She recalled a time

when she raised a concern about equity in teacher allotments:

> And I said it, to the point that I made enough people mad that it just made life miserable
>
> for me. And I will say, now I deal with what I call the Obama-Kamala effect. If you are a
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> black woman or a woman, you open your mouth and you're very headstrong, you get
>
> labeled. And they ain't going to say it to your face either, they'll let you know what they

labeled you by how they treat you. They won't ask you to come to a meeting. They won't ask you to join a committee. You have to bogart your way into stuff. And then you had to figure out the politics of where do I need to beg for permission? And whose ring do I need to kiss? And I still deal – I'm sure other people will say they deal with it that are not Black females – but I will tell you, I deal with it constantly.

Ms. Duncan's experiences are significant because they bring to light some of the ways race and gender impact the leadership journey. While she is a highly accomplished educator and administrator, her identity as a Black woman shapes the way she interacts with a primarily White group of senior leaders in the district where she works. Through the course of her career, Ms. Duncan has developed a sense of autonomy similar to that held by the other participants in this study, but in utilizing that trait, she also has to consider the ways her identity conflicts with those in positions of power who don't share her identity, leading to situations where she has to sacrifice parts of who she is to be fully involved in conversations that affect her, her school, and her students.

Connections to the Theoretical Framework

Throughout the interviews and data analysis, I carefully considered my own *daesin* and the ways it affected the research. As someone who is doing the same work as the participants, I have a strong emotional tie to the methods my team has used to improve student outcomes. In the interviews, I was very careful not to comment or impose my thinking about the participant's responses and examples. Additionally, as I analyzed the data using the hermeneutic circle, I considered the work of the participants in the light of both their context and my own, seeking to understand the overarching themes between the participants and the ways those are reflected in my own context.

I also carefully listened for their participants' experiences as they interacted with their environments. Each of the participants was acutely aware of their own positionality and the ways they were both similar and different from the people around them. I was impressed by their introspection: they all seemed to have an understanding of the critical issues of equity, and also the ways in which they had to carefully navigate the social and cultural norms of their students, faculty, colleagues, and supervisors. In considering autonomy, for example, while the participants all have, deeply value, and consistently use their power to make decisions, they have all also learned to navigate the contextual powers around them. They all cite examples where they remain in their own hermeneutic circle, taking in data to revise their conceptions to better respond to issues of equity and management. Ms. Donahue, for example, has worked to develop a strong understanding of the Latinx community she serves and is acutely aware of the impact exiting the English as a Second Language program has on students' likelihood of graduating from high school. Consequently, she continuously reflects on her school's efforts to help students grow and makes adjustments to structures and practices to ensure students can achieve.

Summary

The results of this research lead to a series of themes I illustrated through situated narratives. These include a clear focus on student success, an understanding of the critical issues of equity in the educational system, early experiences related to marginalization, purposeful hiring practices, a structured love ethic, and a strong sense of autonomy and reflection. While the participants had varied positionality and contexts, their responses were similar, and identified key principles and practices in school transformation and equity-focused leadership. I ensured that the research was credible and reliable through the use of journaling to identify my own biases and a process of reflection and revision to build my conception.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In chapter five, I will present a discussion related to the findings of the study, address limitations and assumptions, and connect the implications of this work to the practice in the field of school leadership.

This study was designed to explore the following research questions:

1. How do principals define the leadership practices they utilize to build systems that result in more equitable outcomes?

2. What are key commonalities of practice and shared traits among the principals of these schools?

To identify these participants, I used public data based on standardized tests administered by the state's Department of Public Instruction, querying for principals leading schools with more than 50 percent students of color, more than 50 percent of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch, and achieving an A or B school grade while exceeding expected academic growth. Upon reviewing the data, 13 principals emerged as potential participants. I reached out to 12, as I am the thirteenth principal.

It is important to recognize I made a significant assumption in my use of standardized test data to identify the participants: because these types of assessments have been found to be racially biased, I operated under the assumption that the principals of schools with high performance and growth scores are equity-focused leaders. As a result, it was important for me to both acknowledge this assumption and probe accordingly through my interview questions to provide validity in the selection of my participant pool.

Several researchers have examined the leadership characteristics and school profiles of equity-focused leaders. These include Scheruich (1998), Theoharis (2009), Gooden and Dantley

(2012), Byrk (2009), Darling-Hammond (1996), Salisbury (2020), McKenzie (2008), Blasé and Blasé (1998), Leithwood and Duke (1998), Aronson and Laughter (2016), and Roegman (2017), and Welton (2015). A synthesis of their work identifies a set of characteristics that are common among equity-focused school leaders: (1) dedication to a vision of student achievement; (2) aggressive student-centeredness; (3) an operational balance of academic press and strong community; and (4) a reflectiveness on the historical roots of inequity. In this study, I sought to evaluate these leaders against those characteristics and add to the field of research by bringing forth the more minute work of equity-focused principals.

The power of this study is in the minutiae. The narratives of the participants allow us some insight into the day-to-day work of transforming schools, and their leadership practices do not lead us to some silver bullet that can be captured in a professional development workshop, or even truly articulated in a principal preparation program. Rather, they demonstrate the power of understanding the historical inequities rooted in racism, the power of setting a vision for student achievement, and the hard work it takes to begin to repay the educational debt.

In examining these narratives, district leaders, school administrators, and the university educational leadership community will gain a deeper understanding of the ground level work it takes to create systems and structures where all students experience positive outcomes. Additionally, this study provides a bridge between the research about leading for equity and the day-to-day practices in schools where students appear to have proportionate outcomes and more equitable access to the opportunity structure.

Three points of discussion serve as the umbrellas for the details of the leadership practices: (1) setting a clear vision for equity and student success and aligning the vision with action steps; (2) developing a understanding of the issues related to equity in both a national and

local context; and (3) ensuring schools employ people who are commited to the work of equity. Under these umbrellas, I will lift out the minuetia – the building level practices that correlate with student success.

Aligning a Clear Vision with Clear Action

One of the most significant role these leaders play is that of a equity-focused visionary. In line with the research of Scheurich, Salisbury, and Gooden & Davis, each participant clearly sees her or himself as the moral compass for their faculty, staff, and students, and takes responsibility for creating both school culture and processes that focus on equitable student access and achievement. Dr. Robinson calls it his "true north," and Dr. Atkins states his primary role is set the vision for the faculty.

A Clear Focus on Students

In establishing the vision for the work of the school, the participants clearly put students at the center. Dr. Alexander stated, "I am for kids first. There's no question there." Dr. Robinson echoed her sentiment: "These are all our kids and this is all our responsibility…. If you make a mistake here, it better be in favor of a kid." This focus on students, and specifically their success, is significant because it sets the priority for the stakeholders in the building. Dr. Alexander has served as a turnaround principal in multiple schools and believes, people who inherit her have a learning curve: "They want it to go teacher and then kid, and I go kid, then teacher, and it usually takes people some time to figure out that I'll look after the teachers, too. But it's by looking after kids that I look after teachers."

In creating this focus on students and their success, the principals set a priority that the happiness of adults is rooted in the success of students. At times, principals set out to support staff in a way that is disconnected from student success. In these schools, however, the

principals cultivate a culture where the satisfaction of adults arises from the accomplishments of students.

Connecting Vision to Action

It is important to point out, however, that these leaders go beyond simply stating a vision. Rather, what makes them unique is their ability to both live out that vision and inspire it in others. Ms. Donahue clearly states that giving inspiring speeches is not enough. Rather, principals must clearly guide the transformation of structures and guide teachers on how they can affect change in their own classrooms. Ms. Donhue continues, "It's a balancing act between vision and action."

The leaders who served as participants in this study have a unique vision for and focus on student achievement: student success embodies their mission. Rather than being a byproduct of the work done by the faculty, these leaders set a clear standard, and planned in a backwards fashion to ensure the structures, instruction, and other factors in the building clearly lead to student outcomes. For example, Ms. Donahue examined the subgroup data for her students, determined her English Language Learners were experiencing disproportionate outcomes, recognized improving those outcomes would result in better long term experiences, and built structures and support to reach goals that were clearly articulated to all stakeholders. In addition, she involved students and parents with the folks from the school when setting goals.

Dr. Robinson took a similar approach when he became the principal in his building. He immediately reviewed student achievement data – looking specifically at the subgroups – to determine where the disproportionate results were most profound. In his case, he discovered many of the students in his building were experiencing substandard math instruction. He immediately reconfigured the instructional model to ensure every student who had not scored

proficient on the previous year's assessment were assigned to math teachers he knew to be effective.

These examples of the alignment of vision with action are key to understanding the power of an equity-focused principal. As a part of the school improvement processes over the past 20 years, principals have become adept at writing vision and mission statements. Ms. Duncan clearly identifies the need for action steps in addition to a clear vision in her school improvement plan: "Put your school improvement plan up there. But if I can't tell you what our issues are and how we're addressing that, then what good is the written plan?"

Thus, these successful leaders go beyond just writing the statements: they actualize the statements to drive a school culture built on reflection and adaptiveness. These leaders work in a cycle of organizational evaluation, constantly monitoring student data to determine where inequitable outcomes occur. Then, they empower – and lead – their faculty and staff through processes that adapt structures in a way that changes outcomes.

Implicit in this work is the action of delving deeper into student achievement data to identify examples of disproportionality. In each of these cases, the participants did not simply review the overarching data for their schools. Instead, they examined the subgroup data to determine which students achieved profiency and which systems needed to be adapted to ensure all students would reach this mark. The willingness to build opportunities for organizational reflectiveness and systemic change is a significant factor in transformation.

A Delicate Balance between Academic Press and Strong Community

A significant component of an equity-focused vision lies in the expectation that all students can be successful. As a part of their vision, the participants required all stakeholders to own this premise. Dr. Robinson stated, "We know a way to escape poverty is through education.

That's why we have to have high expectations in those classrooms. To build equity, we have to pay deliberate attention and those expectations have to be there." Dr. Atkins concurred, "You have to have high expectations. Kids will reach them…if you have high expectations and you put in the right support, they will get there." Further, in not holding high expectations, schools may in fact exploit the neediest students. In these cases, systems that appear to support students actually disempower them by not releasing responsibility. Ms. Duncan gives the example of awarding participation grades rather than truly measuring student learning and implores that principals have to identify when this is happening, "know that's what you're doing, then stop it. And you have to put things in place to keep it from happening. You have to teach teachers [not to disempower]."

The significance of principals holding high expectations is to move beyond deficit thinking, which is rooted in *a blame the victim* orientation that suggests that people are responsible for their predicament and fails to acknowledge that they live within coercive systems that cause harm with no accountability (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). Across the board, the participants identified both academic and management examples where the standards for performance were set high. For example, academically, multiple participants moved to include more students in honors-level classes and instruction, worked to create opportunities for students to take classes beyond the norm, and coached faculty members to scaffold instruction without dimishing the rigor. Additionally, while the participants created systems for student management that took into account students' individual contexts, they also set clear expectations for the school, the ways students engaged, and sought to purposefully teach expectations.

It was significant, however, that as students reached the upper grades, the participants skewed to more of a punitive student management system, with suspensions as the primary

consequences. Research suggests implicit biases and systemically racist structures do correlate with stubborn racial disparities (Dhaliwal, Chin, Lovison, & Quinn, 2020). For the participants in this study, however, language related to restorative practices and relationships was significant. For example, both Dr. Atkins and Dr. Turnbridge, both high school principals, reference the need for "tough love." Dr. Atkins commented, "There has to be tough love. I'm not afraid to suspend them…. [But] when they come back, we love them and we welcome them back."

Further, the participants who worked with students in the middle grades used language centered on relationships rather than discipline. While the middle level principals certainly work to build structures for school management, this focus on relationship building drives the discipline systems. Dr. Alexander, as an example, cited a time when a student was misbehaving and was proud of the teacher's ability to converse with the student to determine the student's behaviors were rooted in her reading skills. Then, the teacher worked with the school administration to support her reading, rather than simply issuing a consequence. By allowing – or even more importantly, seeking out – student voice in the form of counternarratives in both academic and in the interaction with student management systems, the participants build a systemic culture of love, respect, listening, and restoration rather than a closed loop of actions and disciplinary consequences.

Instructional leadership

Implicit to the construction of a culture built on high standards and expectations is the principal's skillset as instructional leader. Interestingly, the participants did not expressly discuss their instructional leadership, but the components of instructional leadership were peppered through the interviews, particularly in the realm of human resources. Ms. Donahue, who spent a significant amount of time as a classroom teacher and lead teacher before moving

into an administrative role, articulated her desire to spread her instructional influence to more teachers and, consequently, to more students in her leadership journey. Despite her experience as an instructional leader, she couched her experiences as the principal in the context of articulating a clear vision, holding high expectations, and hiring the best teachers. The other participants, while less experienced in defined instructional leadership positions, took similar positions: they defined their most important work as ensuring students get strong learning experiences, and generally identified themselves as instructional leaders, or took care to hire assistant principals with a strong instructional background.

Developing an Understanding of the Historical and Present Impact of Inequity

A second significant point of discussion is the participants' understanding of the context of their communities regarding equity and inequity and the power they have to disrupt the prevailing narrative. Tallerico (2000) and Roegman (2017) argue school leaders are required to operate within the social, organizational, personal, and occupational contexts of the communities they serve and the strongest leaders establish a moral purpose for their work to negotiate the culture of the community against the greater good. The leaders in this study exemplify both an understanding of their communities and the tools they use to redevelop the contextual circumstances.

First, each participant was able to clearly define the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic context of the community they served. Dr. Atkins, for example, acknowledged his positionality did not match that of the students, but also explained how his background as an elementary principal in the same attendance zone helped him develop a more nuanced understanding of the context his students held. Drs. Turnbridge and Robinson share a similar history: while their own personal contexts differ from the communities they serve, they have worked in the community

for a significant amount of time and are able to share their understanding of the dynamics. Ms. Duncan's perspective differs from the other participants because her personal history closely matches the students she serves. She notes this common background helps her both understand their circumstances and see the pathways they might take to access the opportunity structure.

The larger discussion around context must center on the participants' willingness to dive deeply into their communities' histories and social structures. A strong awareness of the narratives told within the community allows them to navigate potential rapids and keep their proverbial ships pointed toward the greater outcome of student achievement and success. Further, these leaders hold a powerful sense of autonomy which allows them to make decisions that benefit students, first, and teachers, second, which can disrupt ineffective systems. This disruption creates opportunities for system redesign that leads to more equitable outcomes. Because of this critical understanding, the principals have the ability to scan their communities, apply their own positionality, and mediate the conflict that arises in transformation. Ultimately, they all make decisioins based on their moral compass rather than falling into the push-pull Roegman (2017) identifies. Further, the participants exemplify Bredson, Klar, and Johnson's (2011) description of context responsiveness and cultural literacy: they keep students at the center of their decisions; recognize the power of vision and mission; and build trust through strong relationships.

The Power of Human Resources

Renowned principal and author Baruti Kafele (2016) defines two broad categories of educators he's observed over his decades in the field of K-12 education: those who have deemed they can do the work; and those who have deemed the must do the work. He writes, "Those who have deemed they *can* do the work go into [the school] and do what they do…. But those who

have deemed they *must* do the work are driven by an entirely different force" (p. 87). He states the must educators who must do the work are "living in their calling and walking in their purpose" (p. 87). The participants in this study recognize the power of recruiting and hiring *must* educators.

As noted, the participants in this study establish a clear vision, set high expectations, and chart a path of action steps that leads to school transformation. In their interviews, they argue the most significant component to accomplish this work is to ensure the right people are working with students. When asked about the most important role they fill, each participant stated they serve as the visionary, the recruiter, and the supporter for teachers who, as Dr. Turnbridge proclaimed, "get after it." The participants all prioritized getting to know the faculty members, listening to their narratives, and determining their strengths to place them with the students they will best support. Dr. Robinson discussed the need to leverage individual strengths, hire people with a mindset focused on achievement and equity, and match them with the right students, Ms. Duncan notes she hires staff that know how to get around barriers with students, and Dr. Atkins equated his role to that of a general manager that must have the right players or the playbook does not matter. Further, all of the participants discussed the need to move away from the norm in teacher assignment – veteran teachers getting the least challenging students – to a model where the most experienced teachers whose students had the strongest outcomes work with students who need the most scaffolding and the best instruction.

While the participants did not directly discuss the methods they use in their hiring practices, it is clear they have a vision of the characteristics an effective teacher holds. These include strong pedagogical skills, an ability to build community and relationships with students, and judgement to make good decisions independently that benefit students. Dr. Atkins noted he

focuses on hiring great teachers, putting them in the right places, providing the right support, offering praise, and doing everything to keep them.

Further, the participants were able to delineate between coaching up and coaching out – the times they needed to support a teacher and when they needed to release a teacher. Dr. Atkins, for example, discussed taking care of his best and noted that "if the worst don't feel good about it, or they don't like it, they either need to get better or get going." Ms. Donahue mirrored this sentiment, recalling the times in her leadership journey that she lost respect for people and needed to point out when they were not meeting the high expectations.

Ultimately, this realm of human resources is a make or break component for equity-focused principals. Transforming a school is possible, but a critical factor is ensuring the adults in the building not only do not serve as barriers to the opportunity structure, but rather become factors that catalyze access for students.

Equity-focused Leadership

In this study, I sought to highlight the connections between the theoretical practices and beliefs of school leaders established in prior research and the reality in schools where students of color and those from poverty are demonstrating positive outcomes on measures of academic achievement. Through the spiral explication of my interviews, I believe each of the leaders demonstrate the practices that have led to their students' success.

First, each of the participants has established a clear vision for their schools that is directly focused on the achievement and support of students in all subgroups, rather than just achievement as a whole. This focus on subgroups rather than overall achievement allows them to think critically about the work in their buildings rather than assuming all students are doing well based on the achievement of one subgroup. In addition, the participants clearly articulated

and lived out a vision based on the belief that all students can be successful with the right support, and that anything that didn't lead to that success had to be redesigned.

Second, this vision and the corresponding systematic design is aggressively student-centered. Scheurich (1998) argued equity-focused leaders hold an "open and even aggressive willingness to alter any aspect of schooling for the purpose of achieving the goal of student success" (p. 462). Each of the participants in this study clearly defined their purpose through the lens of students and established that their support of faculty and staff was rooted in the work of student achievement. Additionally, the participants all owned a sense of autonomy though which they were willing to engage in divergent thinking to improve or redesign the systems, even in the face of judgement from their supervisors, colleagues, and community. To this end, while the participants were certainly shaped by their context, they more often shaped that context through their ability to articulate and conceptualize a student-centered vision.

Third, each of the participants exemplified McKenzie and colleagues' (2008) call for a love ethic that balances rigor and community. The schools led by these principals hold high expectations for all students, are focused on ensuring students in all subgroups experience learning experiences aligned to the standards and are involved in school and classroom communities that provide love, support, appreciation, common affiliation, and the acknowledgement of positionality and social and cultural context. While not all of the participants see themselves as an instructional expert, they do recognize the significance of instructional focus and, at minimum, surround themselves with colleagues who do have this focus.

Finally, the participants all expressed an understanding of the examples of inequity that permeate their schools and communities. They all communicated their own positionality, were

able to define the positionality of their students and staff and recognized the present and historical barriers that prevented students from accessing the opportunity structure. While some of the participants were more critically aware - for example, several participants cited components of anti-racism, critical race theory, or equity-focused practices in which their actions and decisions were rooted - all of the participants demonstrated the ability to articulate the inequities, even if they didn't directly identify the theory. Further, by defining education as the great equalizer, the participants recognized Friere's approach to freedom: they understand the impact of schooling to either free a child from social reproduction or constrain them to their current context.

The irony of this belief is the disconnect between true education and the racially biased standardized tests used to measure student achievement. While I used standardized test scores as the basis for selecting the participants in this study, it is significant that the participants did not cite preparation for standardized tests as a component for success. Rather, the principals all cited excellent teachers and engaging instruction as a key difference maker for students. Their use of standardized test data – to self evaluate for disproportionalities, for example – was cited as a factor for school transformation. While the tests are inherently biased, the response of the participants in regard to considering teacher assignment, instructional approaches, and appropriate scaffolding for students is more focused on student engagement than on test preparation.

Considering leadership styles

It is important to consider the impact of leadership style in this work. In this study, five of the participants primarily utilized a collaborative leadership style to work with faculty and staff to catalyze change. While these principals certainly cast a strong vision, set clear action

steps, and held all stakeholders to high standards, they prioritized collaborative interactions with both adults and students. Dr. Turnbridge, however, employed a more authoritative approach. For example, he stated his role was to support faculty, but was less inclined to involve them in the decision making process. Further, his approach to student management was rooted in an action-consequence framework rather than the more restorative approach employed by the other participants. The positive outcomes on standardized assessments in his school, however, are not surprising, as the practices he employed were similar to those utilized in the other schools.

The Bridge between Research and Practice

One limitation of Scheurich's research centered on equity-focused leadership is the consideration of the delicate balance between working for equity and the organizational management of the complexities of a school. Often, the presentation of any practices for school transformation fail to recognize the importance of the messiness of practice versus the cleanness of theory. In other words, when researchers attempt to capture effective practices, they fail to inform learners that the real work it takes to reach a level of effectiveness involves trials, errors, struggles, and failures. Further, because school leaders and teachers have little control over the context of their students, the implementation of any set of practices is messy. Such is the case in equity-focused leadership.

The narratives of the participants allow us some insight into the day-to-day work of reimagining schools, and their leadership practices do not lead us to some silver bullet that can be captured in a professional development workshop, or even truly articulated in a principal preparation program. Rather, their narratives demonstrate the power of having an open mind to to the positionality of students and families, the significance of purposefully ensuring school leaders understand the history of racism and marginalization in the United States and within the

context of their own communities, and the necessity of setting a vision and working toward it.

Moreover, these narratives establish that transformation involves hard work. To this end, while

this phenomenon is profound, it also isn't: this work can be done in schools across the country,

but it must be led by people who are aware and determined. They must work within their own

contexts to find the balance between transformation and management, between support and

deconstruction, between overt action and subversive change.

These equity-focused leaders have found their own version of that balance. They

understand their communities, recognize systemic inequities at a national *and* local level, build

relationships to establish trust, then actively focus on deconstructing systems that do not result in

equitable outcomes to replace them with systems that do. Their steady leadership - where the

buses run on time, the hallways are organized, the cafeteria does not back up, and the

stakeholders feel safe - allows them to affect others' conceptions about the grander issues of

equity. This is the root of transformation.

Assumptions

I entered this study with a set of assumptions based on my own positionality as someone

doing similar work, with similar results, to the participants. My biggest assumption was that the

participants would have an overt focus on equity. This assumption was validated to a degree, as

the participants all articulated an understanding that the systems in which they work are

inequitable. I revised my conception, however, as I considered the impact of purposeful racial

equity professional development on the participants' level of understanding. For example, three

of the participants are principals in the same district where I serve, and we have all participated

in a three-day racial equity workshop centered on the historical underpinnings of white

supremacy in American and in our communities. When I compared my local colleagues'

descriptions about inequity with the participants from more rural districts, I observed a difference in their ability to articulate the purpose for their leadership practices and decisions about structures within their schools. Specifically, these participants commented more about the connection between their schools and the structures in the community that contribute to inequitable access.

Second, I assumed the participants would all be divergent thinkers. I believed this to be true because the norm of education in America is inequity, and I assumed school leaders whose results were outside of the norm would be thinking in a way that diverged from that norm. Through the interviews, I listened purposefully to determine how the participants approached problems. The participants reflected this assumption in their description of the ways in which they challenged the norms, focused on subgroup performance, and recruited and assigned teachers purposefully to achieve equitable results.

Finally, I entered this research with the assumption that the participants' positionality would have a significant impact on their acquisition of autonomy and their interaction with the community context. In considering my own positionality, I am acutely aware I look like the power structure: I am a white male raised in the community where I work by parents with significant post-graduate education. (My father holds two master's degrees and my mother is trained as a biologist.) I considered this assumption in my interviews and found the participants with a positionality similar to mine have had experiences similar to mine. However, the participants who are different from me walked a different pathway in their development as leaders. Dr. Alexander, for example, explained the significance of gender in her choice of clothing, and explored the perception that she is a wild card, and Ms. Duncan clearly articulated the impact of her race in her interactions with the power structures.

Limitations

As with all phenomenological studies, generalizability and the size of the participant pool are limitations. The population for this study consisted of 13 principals in the state, and after recruitment, six agreed to serve as the sample. While the insight from these six participants is significant, and I believe their experiences would be understood by other individuals in the same context, the sample size does limit my ability to generalize the results. It should be noted, however, that the purpose of a phenomenological study is not generalization, but to understand and describe a specific phenomenon in-depth and reach the essence of participants' lived experience of the phenomenon.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was focused on a sample in a single state in the United States. Research indicates, however, similar results exist for schools nationally. A similar study using a larger population would be prudent to both lend credibility to the results of this study, but also to examine common leadership practices in schools that experience this phenomenon, and the impact of geographic context on successful school leaders.

While this study brought to light the general themes related to equity-focused leadership, significant conversations should be had with the participants regarding their perceptions and practices in each of the realms. For example, we could learn much through further discussions about how these leaders created both a powerful vision and the corresponding ownership among stakeholders, how they translated vision to action, and how they recruit and hire faculty and staff. These follow up conversations would result in significant insight into the nuanced practices of these educators.

In addition, while this study examined the practices and beliefs of secondary school principals, the population of elementary schools who met the criteria was significantly larger. Further research related to the leadership practices at that level would be significant, as well as a comparison between school leaders at the different levels. Additionally, a study that examined the practices and beliefs of principals in schools that are approaching the threshold established in this study (i.e.: exceeding expected growth, but not yet an A or B school) would provide insight into the process of transformation and allow for a comparison to the leaders in this study. These findings could identify details to help schools cross the line.

Finally, while I was able to establish a qualitative bridge between student achievement on standardized assessments and the focus of school leaders on equity, a quantitative study would be appropriate to determine the impact of an equity-focused leader on student achievement.

Implications

This study illustrated several implications related to the preparation, selection, and professional development of school leaders. A delineation exists between school leaders who have the skill set to catalyze school transformation and those who maintain the present and historical norm. The use of screening tools that measure the leadership and personal qualities of the school administrators in this study could help identify candidates who must do this work versus those who can be a principal. For example, colleges of education and districts should consider candidates' belief systems about students, practices for hiring, and ability to think divergently when faced with difficult issues.

Contextual Literacy

A principal's ability, and the opportunities, to develop a sense of contextual literacy is significant. Schools are a direct reflection of the communities in which they reside: they reflect

the culture, history, social structures, and systems that either allow or serve as a barrier to the opportunity structure for stakeholders. Principals in all communities must intentionally seek to understand this context in order to make decisions that can disrupt inequitable systems and norms. In reality, the day-to-day work of running a school is important, but it is through the greater contextual understanding where principals can deconstruct the systems that result in disproportionate outcomes and reconstruct those that promote equity. The work of building equity is not done in isolation. To this end, school districts must seek out opportunities for school leaders to interact with the greater community to develop an understanding of the narrative, and more importantly all of the counternarratives that drive access.

Selection of Principals and Faculty

School districts must carefully consider the positionality of principals assigned to schools facing challenges. The line between an outstanding principal and a marginal one is often rooted in an ability to become contextually literate, to think divergently, and to create a vision that focuses on the well-being of subgroups of students rather than being satisfied with the success of the whole. Districts must vet and select these principals carefully, build systems to identify potential leaders who possess these abilities, and purposefully spotlight the work of successful leaders.

The principals in this study are adept at recruiting, hiring, assigning, supporting, and coaching effective teachers, and they cite this skill as one of the primary keys for success. Even among the participants, however, the hiring processes are not systematized and are dependent on the principal. In the same way districts must carefully consider the placement of principals, they must also develop tools to identify teachers who possess the skillset that allows them to build

community and engage students in high academic press. These might include rubrics based on

the characteristics embodied by these traits.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Through this investigation, I provided a detailed analysis of the life-world of equity-focused leaders through the explication of their narratives and reflections on their leadership practices and beliefs. Despite working in a system historically designed for social replication, these leaders have developed a vision and skill set that allows them to practice transformational leadership to redesign schooling systems that provide more equitable access, experience, and outcomes. These practices include establishing a vision focused on student achievement, an intense focus on keeping children at the center of decisions, effective utilization of human resources, and an ability to think divergently in a way that diverges from the norm. The result of this work is student success. It is my hope that colleges of education, school district leaders, and school leaders consider the importance of becoming more aware of the issues of inequity and focus on repaying the education debt by disrupting the norm in a way that empowers students to share their counternarratives, gain access to aligned curriculum and instruction that values their personal contexts, and gain access to the opportunity structure. It is also my hope that the narratives of these school leaders provide an example that bridges theory and practice to improve the lives of children across our country. In particular, I would like to highlight four recommendations that rise from this research.

First, districts must carefully vet candidates for principalships using an equity-focused lens. In this study, only 13 of the nearly 2,600 principals in this southeastern state led schools where outcomes of student achievement on standardized tests moved closer to proportionaliy. The narratives of the six participants in this study give us insight into the awareness these principals have toward issues of equity. Specifically, they can identify examples of inequity in their buildings and are willing to deviate from the norm to disrupt the systems that led to

disproportionate results. Further, the participants exemplify their contextual understanding of their communities. In the interview process, districts must pose scenarios where candidates demonstrate their ability to: (1) uncover examples of inequity; (2) propose actions to disrupt the systems leading to these examples; and (3) specifically identify the actions they would take to lead transformational change. Districts must not assume these skills are innate in all leaders and must prioritize an equity-focused mindset as much as organizational management and instructional leadership, as the latter serve as a means to an equity-focused end.

Second, districts must provide principals with the avenues to develop contextual literacy and understanding in the communities they serve. School transformation does not happen outside of the context of a community. In this study, the participants all shared an nuanced understanding of their stakeholders and the structures in the community that contribute to inequitable access to the opportunity structure and, correspondingly, to disproportionate outcomes in schooling. This contextual literacy is key to transformational change. Principals must get to know their students, their students' families, and the the stories in the community that define the present situation.

Third, principals must use their contextual literacy to develop an equity-focused process for hiring teachers and staff. All of the participants shared that one of the primary keys to success is having the right teachers in the classrooms and the right support staff in the building. By querying for a candidate's equity skillset, principals can identify the human resources that will best serve students by deconstructing inequitable systems and replacing them with those that provide access to all.

Finally, districts and principals must define a reality where the success of students sits at the center of every stakeholder's focus. Often principals get bogged down in management at the

expense of student achievement, leading to situations where inequitable systems are reformed rather than transformed. Ultimately, efforts to reform a system without identifying and disrupting the structures within the system that lead to inequitable outcomes results in continued inequity. Instead, by focusing on subgroup achievement, principals can identify the examples of inequity in their building and take steps to disrupt the unjust processes. Implicitly, schools must create learning environments where students experience strong community and *all* students, regardless of positionality, have access to rigorous academic press, appropriate scaffolding, and a release of responsibility.

An effective, equity-focused principal in a school is the key to success. Without this, the vision for equity is never cast, the steps toward equity stall, at best, or are never taken, at worst, and systems designed to produce disproportionate outcomes continue to do so. It is through a focus on equity that schools transform and students gain access to opportunity structure, leading to improved outcomes in school and in life.

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APPENDIX A: IRB EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

I ILLINOIS

**OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR
FOR RESEARCH & INNOVATION**

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
805 W. Pennsylvania Ave., MC-095
Urbana, IL 61801-4822

Notice of Exempt Determination

November 23, 2020

Principal Investigator	Yoon Pak
CC	Michael Williams
Protocol Title	*The belief systems, personal characteristics, and practices of school leaders who design socially just, anti-racist structures*
Protocol Number	21431
Funding Source	Unfunded
Review Category	Exempt 2 (ii)
Determination Date	November 23, 2020
Closure Date	November 22, 2025

This letter authorizes the use of human subjects in the above protocol. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) has reviewed your application and determined the criteria for exemption have been met.

The Principal Investigator of this study is responsible for:
- Conducting research in a manner consistent with the requirements of the University and federal regulations found at 45 CFR 46.
- Requesting approval from the IRB prior to implementing major modifications.
- Notifying OPRS of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated events, participant complaints, or protocol deviations.
- Notifying OPRS of the completion of the study.

Changes to an **exempt** protocol are only required if substantive modifications are requested and/or the changes requested may affect the exempt status.

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Email to Request Participation

Dr. _____,

My name is Michael Williams and I am the principal at H.E. Winkler Middle School in Cabarrus County, NC. I am writing to request your assistance as I complete my dissertation at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in Educational Policy, Organization and Leadership with a concentration in Diversity and Equity.

I'm sending this email to you because I am researching the impact of strong leaders in schools that serve students from marginalized backgrounds. I disaggregated the state data based on the following criteria: (1) school is greater than 50% free/reduced lunch; (2) student body is greater than 50% students of color; (3) school achieved and "A" or "B" designation; and (4) school exceeded expected growth. After applying the criteria, I found 13 principals at comprehensive middle and high schools (i.e.: not Early Colleges) in the state. You are one of the 13!

I am writing to request one hour of your time to conduct an interview (on Zoom) related to your beliefs about schooling, teaching, learning, and equity. I'll be conducting interviews in December with a timeline of transcribing, coding, and writing in January and February. My dissertation is purely qualitative and will explore the belief systems of principals who are doing this great work.

I can work my schedule completely around yours if you would be willing to help me in this endeavor.

With appreciation for your time and consideration,

michael

APPENDIX C: ONLINE CONSENT FORM

Online Consent Form

The belief systems, personal characteristics, and practices of school leaders who design socially just, anti-racist structures

You are being asked to participate in a voluntary research study. The purpose of this study is to identify practices, belief systems, and personal characteristics of successful school principals. Participating in this study will involve one interview and your participation will last approximately one hour. There are no known risks to participating in this study beyond those faced in everyday life. Benefits related to this research include developing a clearer understanding of the practices, beliefs, and personal characteristics of successful school leaders.

Principal Investigator Name and Title: Yoon Pak, PhD
Department and Institution: Educational Policy, Organization, and Leadership, University of Illinois
Contact Information: yoonpak@illinois.edu

What procedures are involved?
The study procedures are to conduct a single interview that is less than one hour.

This research will be performed via Zoom and will be audio recorded. You will need to participate one time. Each interview will last approximately one hour. The audio recordings will be deleted at the conclusion of the research study.

Will my study-related information be kept confidential?

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. When this research is discussed or published, no one will know that you were in the study. But, when required by law or university policy, identifying information may be seen or copied by: a) The Institutional Review Board that approves research studies; b) The Office for Protection of Research Subjects and other university departments that oversee human subjects research; c) University and state auditors responsible for oversight of research.

Will I be reimbursed for any expenses or paid for my participation in this research?
You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?
If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate, or to withdraw after beginning participation, will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in your best interests, or you were to object to any future changes that may be made in the study plan.

Will data collected from me be used for any other research?

Online Consent Form

Your de-identified information will not be used for future research without additional informed consent.

Who should I contact if I have questions?
If you have questions about this project, you may contact Yoon Pak at (217) 300-2819 or yoonpak@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

I have read and understand the above consent form. I certify that I am 18 years old or older. I voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

Participant Signature:_____

Date:_____